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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH, 1969

VOL. 24, NO. 4

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

KILL IN THE DARK

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Somewhere, hidden, deadly, lay the answer to the incredible secret a small-time thief had taken to his grave. Mike Shayne also knew the answer to that secret—but bullets and a wall of blazing death held him captive!

. 2 to 49

NEW KEVIN KAR NOVELET

THE HIPPIE MURDERS

MAX VAN DERVEER 62

ALL NEW SHORT STORIES

DON'T MAKE IT A FEDERAL CASE

ED LACY 50

LEO MARGULIES

Publisher

THE DAY OF THE DEAD

JAMES SANDAVAL 92

CYLVIA KLEINMAN

Editorial Director

THE MACE MURDERS

ROBERT EDMOND ALTER 101

HOLMES TAYLOR

Associate Editor

MURDER ON LOCATION

FRANK B. LONG 112

THE LAST LAUGH

LEO R. ELLIS 126

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KILL IN THE DARK

A penny-ante heister . . . a girl with a deadly mission—only Mike Shayne knew how to put that grim puzzle together. But a blazing hell stood in his way!

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**



SHE WAS A small woman, shabby, and she looked up with dead, cold eyes as Mike Shayne came into his office that Wednesday morning. Shayne glanced at the woman and arched a questioning eyebrow at his pert secretary, Lucy Hamilton.

The woman stood up abruptly, her cheap handbag clutched to her breast.

"You Mike Shayne?"

Lucy Hamilton bridled. "If you'll wait, Mrs. Reilly, Mr. Shayne will see you soon."

"Is he Shayne, or ain't he?" Mrs.

Reilly demanded. "If he ain't, I'll wait. I got time. If he is I'll talk to him now."

Lucy's brown eyes snapped, but Shayne raised his hand in a gesture of conciliation.

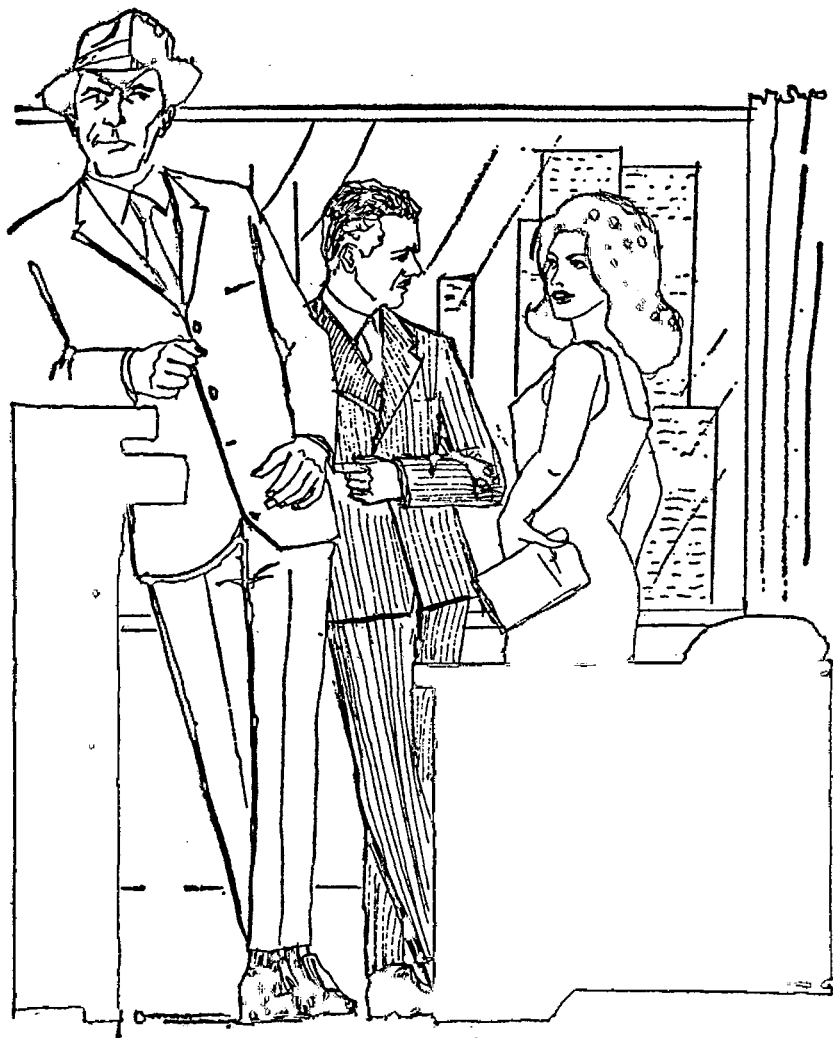
"It's okay, Angel," he said. "I'll see Mrs. Reilly. Come inside, ma'am."

The redhead strode on into his private office, with the shabby woman trailing behind, her handbag still clutched as if she were afraid someone would steal it.

Shayne waved her to a seat. She perched on the edge of a

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THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



chair, waiting for him to sit down behind his desk.

"Okay, Mrs. Reilly. What's the problem?"

"My husband is dead, that's the problem," the gray woman said. "Twenty years we was married, never a dime to spare, no decent home. For a vacation we went to a boarding house in the Keys. And why? Because Willy never made a cent more'n we needed to stay alive. Not Willy. No talent, no push, no guts, no ideas, never."

"How did Willy die, Mrs. Reilly?" Shayne asked quietly.

"How?" she said bitterly. "Like I said, Willy never made a buck in his life, and never could have—not an extra buck, not a fast buck. A second rate clerk, my Willy. You got the picture yet?"

"A quiet man, not much drive, maybe slow."

"A third-rater, a patsy, and honest as they come," she said, and her dead eyes looked up straight at Shayne. "Honest and a good guy. He never gave me much, but he never gave me any trouble, either. I wasn't happy, but I wasn't unhappy. Now he's gone and what am I going to do?"

Shayne watched her. She spoke in a cold, flat voice. She spoke bitterly, and yet he knew that she had loved the dead Willy. She had needed the dead man: two drab lives merged for a small comfort. She continued to stare at Shayne.

"You've got him in your head now?" she said. "Okay. He was killed in a robbery. Shot. He was robbing his own office, and his boss shot him dead. That's what they all say."

"Who says, Mrs. Reilly?"

"Them, the office people, and the police. The boss, Mr. Roger Skell himself, didn't know it was Willy. He caught the thief in the office, chased him. The thief fired at Mr. Skell, so he says, and Mr. Skell fired back and killed my Willy."

"The police are convinced that your husband was the thief?"

"Oh, they're sure. A cop was right there. Willy had the money on him, a gun in his hand. End of case and end of my Willy."

Shayne rubbed at his jaw. "What can I do, Mrs. Reilly?"

"You can find out why my Willy was killed. He wasn't a thief. We didn't need money any more than we always had. We had no plans, no sudden need. Willy didn't rob any office, especially not his own office."

Shayne was uneasy. "Look, Mrs. Reilly, there may have been reasons even you didn't know. If the police—"

"Maybe he was gambling, you mean? No! A woman, maybe? He was going to run off to Rio with some young chick? Don't make me laugh. No, Shayne, Willy didn't do any robbery."

"All right," Shayne said, "but

what do you have to go on? A hunch. You *know* Willy didn't try to rob anything. What can I do with that? Where do I start? What makes me think that maybe, just maybe, the police could be wrong?"

"Isn't my word enough? I'm not trying to prove it to you. I'm going to pay you to prove it."

"No, your word isn't enough. I've got to have at least a small doubt myself. That's the way it is."

"You like it easy, like all the others," Mrs. Reilly said. "Okay."

She opened her shapeless handbag that had seen a lot of years of wear. She laid a letter and two tickets on Shayne's desk. He didn't touch them; he just looked at them with a puzzled frown.

She said, "The letter's from that boarding house in Key West I told you we go to on vacation. Read it."

Shayne read it. It was brief, simple. It said that Mr. Joe Gross would be happy to welcome his old friends, the Reilly family, with a room for a date three weeks away.

The tickets were for a small theater on a night two days ago.

"That room costs three dollars a day for a couple, Mr. Shayne," Mrs. Reilly said. "Everyone knows we go there almost every year. It don't sound much like a man who was planning a robbery, does it? Three weeks from now, same old place. Three dollars a day."

"Good cover, maybe, if he got away with the robbery."

"Those tickets are for the night Willy was killed. I was at the theater, waiting. I waited an hour after the show went on. Willy had wanted to see that show for months. The tickets cost money, and Willy never wasted money. I was waiting because Willy got a phone call and had to go out earlier."

"A call from who?"

"He never said. Just run out and told me to wait at the theater; he wouldn't be late."

Shayne scratched at his gaunt jaw. "It's not much, Mrs. Reilly. If Willy was going to pull a robbery and that night seemed right, a couple of theater tickets wouldn't have stopped him."

"Maybe not, but they make me think, mister. Willy didn't have any motive for a robbery. There has to be some clue in a man's life to point to him pulling a robbery."

Shayne leaned back in his chair, his heavy brows furrowed in concentration. "All right. I'll buy that a lot more than your other reasons. If what you tell me is true, maybe there is something to look at. I'm not promising anything, you understand. It's a hundred-to-one the police are right. They don't make many mistakes on robbery cases."

She stood up, still clutching that decrepit bag. "I don't ask no miracles; just take a look. I know

Willy didn't get killed in any robbery."

"Do you have any ideas why he was killed?"

"No, except Mr. Roger Skell, the big man, shot him. Maybe Mr. Skell got a reason. How much I owe you?"

"How much can you pay?"

"I got some money. What's your rate. I pay the rate."

"Give my secretary fifty dollars as a retainer. I charge one hundred dollars a day. This time I won't charge if I don't turn up anything except that Willy was guilty."

"You won't, Shayne, and I pay the rate. A hundred a day is the rate. You know, Willy never saw one hundred dollars on any day of his life. Money scared him. He wouldn't have known what to do with real money. He liked being what he was, a mouse no one looked at even once on the street. A good man in his way, and he was all I had."

She turned and walked out then. Shayne sat in silence, listening to her flat voice ask Lucy Hamilton for a receipt and giving her home address. The outer door closed.

Lucy came in. "I don't like that woman!"

"I don't know, Angel. Maybe you're wrong this time. She's carrying a big grief, and maybe the way she acts is her way of keeping a grip. It's pretty hard to lose your whole world."



"Can you help her, Michael?"

"I don't know, Angel. Probably not, but I'll have a try."

II

CHIEF WILL GENTRY was busy in his office, but Mike Shayne's old friend took two minutes to talk to the redhead.

"Reilly, eh?" the gruff Chief growled. "She's been talking down here, too. I'm sorry for her, Mike,

but the case is open and shut. I looked it over myself."

"How far, Will? Did you investigate, or did you just look at the reports?"

"The reports. You think McGuire and Bellows can't handle a case?"

"They know their jobs," Shayne admitted. "Are they both convinced?"

"McGuire handled the robbery angle. He's sure it was Reilly planning a robbery and Skell caught him. Bellows did the homicide end, and he wrote it up as killed while engaged in a robbery."

"Can I talk to them?"

"McGuire's out, but Bellows has all the data. Go ahead, Mike. You've got to make a living."

"I won't fight you, Will. But if I find your men are wrong, you'll want to know," Shayne said.

"Okay, Mike, I'll want to know that. You know where to find Bellows."

Shayne went down to the office of the Homicide Squad. He found Lieutenant George Bellows at his desk. Bellows was no happier than Gentry had been to hear the name Reilly.

"So she got to you?" Bellows said. "Yeah, that figures. I've seen bitter widows, Mike, but Mrs. Reilly takes the prize. They never really know the men they live with, do they?"

"Most don't," Shayne said. "Some do."

Bellows tented his hands and eyed the redhead. "And you think maybe Mrs. Reilly does?"

"I don't know, George. That's what she's paying me to find out," Shayne said.

Bellows scowled. He sat and watched Mike Shayne for a long minute. No policeman really likes a private detective nosing into a case, and no policeman can even tolerate a private detective opening a closed case. But Shayne was special in Miami. He had been around a long time. He played it fair and straight. Bellows still didn't like it.

"Okay, Mike, I'll let you look at it all, every damned detail."

Bellows got up abruptly, strode to a file, and returned to drop the file in front of the redhead. Then Bellows left the office.

Shayne went to work. He read the report cover to cover. Then he read it again. He lit a cigarette and sat back to think.

Boiled down it was pretty simple. Patrolman Adolpho Cruse, the regular patrol car man in that part of Miami, was passing the office and small factory of Skell Electronics, Inc. when he heard shouts from inside the factory office. He ran from his car to the outer fence, only some fifty feet from the door of the office. The fence was locked.

While Cruse was working on the gate, the shouts came again, and a masked man ran from the front

door of the office. The man carried a pistol. Officer Cruse drew his gun and called to the man to stop.

At that moment another man rushed from the office in pursuit of the masked man. This second man, later identified as Roger Skell, president of the corporation, shouted after the fleeing gunman. He also carried a pistol.

Officer Cruse, unable to open the gate, pursued along the fence from outside. Up to this point everything had happened within seconds, in a flash much faster than it took to tell. The masked man was running inside the fence toward the left, where there was a narrow, dark alley between Skell Electronics and another building. Roger Skell was chasing him some ten yards behind. Officer Cruse was outside the fence but no more than twenty yards away in the dark night.

Just as the fleeing man reached the narrow alley, he turned and fired first at Roger Skell, who went down. Then at Officer Cruse, who dived for the ground. Before Cruse could take good aim, Roger Skell fired twice, and the fleeing man vanished into the alley. Skell remained lying on the ground; he had been hit.

Officer Cruse climbed the fence now and ran into the alley after the gunman—and stumbled over a man on the ground. It was the fleeing thief, still masked with a black doctor's type bag on the

ground beside him. Cruse examined him and found him dead, shot once through the heart. Cruse examined the black bag at once, and found twenty thousand dollars in packaged bills.

Cruse then returned to Skell, who was not badly hurt, having been shot in the leg. Cruse tended to the wound as best he could, stopped the bleeding, and then went to his car to call in his report.

Lieutenant's McGuire and Bellows arrived some ten minutes later, and the Medical Examiner about fifteen minutes after that. Skell was attended to, the dead thief identified as William Reilly, clerk in the office of Skell Electronics, Inc. That finished the first part of the report.

The medical examiner's report stated that William Reilly, aged 46, had died of a single gunshot wound in the heart, fired from fairly close range. Time of death was between 7:30 and 8:30 that night. Officer Cruse had stated that all the action began at about 8:00. Ballistics matched the bullet that had killed Reilly to Roger Skell's pistol that had been in Skell's hand when Reilly reached the businessman.

Shayne sighed, and stared at the ceiling. He was feeling grim. Mrs. Reilly had not mentioned that the whole affair had been witnessed by a policeman.

There was no point in going on.

III

BUT HE HAD taken money, and he owed a job. Mike Shayne lit another cigarette and turned to Lieutenant McGuire's robbery report.

Immediately after the shooting, once Roger Skell had been attended to, McGuire got the company president's story. It was transcribed and signed.

"I was working late on a new diode-switch I'm developing. My private laboratory is adjacent to my office, which is next to the treasurer's office. Our treasurer is my brother, Morton. About eight P.M. I heard a noise somewhere in the office. I was aware that we had a large amount of cash in our cash file for a special stock purchase we needed on our newest solenoid relay."

McGuire: *"The cash was in a safe?"*

"No, sir, we don't have an office safe. We use a locked file cabinet, fireproof. We're small and we almost never have any cash."

McGuire: *"But this time you did, and everyone in the office knew that?"*

"Not everyone, but most of the actual staff. Knowing this, I went to investigate the noise and found the door to the treasurer's office open. Alarmed, I went back to my desk and got my pistol. I have always had

one there. I went back out, but I must have made too much noise. I saw this masked man already running for the door.

"I shouted and gave chase. The rest you know. When we all returned to the office, the file cabinet was broken open, twenty thousand dollars was gone, and Reilly had it."

"You identify William Reilly as the dead man?"

"Yes."

"You didn't recognize Reilly in the office?"

"No, sir. He was masked, and I only got a quick look as he ran."

That ended Roger Skell's statement. Except for the fact that Skell thought that just about everyone in his office knew that he would be working in his laboratory that night.

Shayne smoked and rubbed at his gaunt jaw. Everyone knew about the cash, including Reilly. On the other hand Reilly should have known that Skell would be working late. It didn't seem like the best time for Reilly to attempt a burglary, except that the money would not have been there at another time.

It was possible that Reilly, knowing where the laboratory was in relation to the treasurer's office, might have hoped to go unheard. Still, it wasn't the smartest time for a robbery.

Shayne returned to the rest of



Lieutenant McGuire's report on the robbery investigation. McGuire had done a complete check of Davis's background and activities before the robbery. Most of it seemed to confirm what Mrs. Reilly had told Shayne. Up until just before the robbery attempt, Reilly had seemed to be just the gray little nobody she had described.

But McGuire had uncovered some damning evidence in the days just preceding the robbery. On William Reilly's body they had found a brand new key to the outer door of the office. A check revealed that Miss Gwen Davis's office key had been taken from her desk and replaced in the wrong place. William Reilly did not normally have an office key.

The black bag in which they had found the money was new, and was traced to a luggage shop near the office. The owner of the shop positively identified William Reilly as the man who had bought the bag only the day before.

The pistol used by Reilly was traced to a pawn shop, where the nervous owner also identified Reilly as the man who had bought the pistol only two days before.

Finally, contrary to Mrs. Reilly's assertions, McGuire checked into Reilly's actions recently and came up with the clincher—the motive. It seemed that William Reilly had recently taken up a hobby—gambling. McGuire found that the meek clerk had owed ten thousand dollars to the not-so-meek Sanchez Batista, a local bookmaker of nasty reputation.

Batista had not hidden the debt; in fact the bookie had been loud in his denunciations of a welsher who had the nerve to go out and get killed still owing Batista money.

That clinched it for McGuire.

Mike Shayne had to admit, with a groan, that it was a pretty open and shut affair.

Yet his gray eyes narrowed as he thought about it. It was almost too perfect.

The proof was there, true, but the proof did not fit with what William Reilly had been before. Mrs. Reilly was right about that—the change was pretty damned sudden.

Shayne lit another cigarette and considered. First, Reilly had changed. Second, a robbery on a night when Roger Skell was working in his lab was dumb. Why not wait until Skell had gone, at least?

Third, what about the vacation plans and the theater tickets? Taken with the rest, that gave Shayne some thoughts. It could be that Reilly picked the night specially because he did have theater tickets and hoped it would be a cover. On the other hand, he had been cutting it fine by attempting the robbery when he did.

No, Shayne decided, it might be worth looking a little deeper into the whole affair. Somehow, William Reilly had been very careless and very unlucky, and Shayne was not sure he believed in such a sudden change in the whole life-pattern of a man of forty-six.

Lieutenant Bellows was angry when he returned and listened to Shayne's doubts.

"Mike, this time you're off base.

Believe me. I've been around a long time, and I never saw a more open-and-shut case. There isn't even a possibility that we're wrong, unless you're implying that Patrolman Cruse is lying, and I hope you're not implying that."

"Cruse is above suspicion?"

"No one is above suspicion, and you know it. But Cruse is as close as anyone comes."

"Those tickets bother me, and that vacation plan."

"Maybe Reilly wanted it to bother us. Maybe he arranged it that way."

"If he did, his timing was very bad, George, and his brains were asleep."

"That could be. Mike, the man was caught in a robbery, period."

"It was stupid to make his play when Skell was there."

"He was masked. He expected someone to maybe see him. As long as he got away, what difference did it make? Maybe that was part of the plan, too. If he'd gotten away it would have made us tend to rule out an inside job."

Shayne nodded. "You could be right, George. But I think I'll nose around some."

"Go ahead, but be careful what you say. Friend or no friend, you try to go against the department I'll nail you!"

"Sure, George," Shayne said, as he stood up.

He walked out with Bellows glaring at his back.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE stopped at the house of the widow, picked up a photograph of William Reilly, and told the widow that the police were probably right.

"No, they're not," she said.

"What about the gambling, Mrs. Reilly?"

"Willy never gambled. He was afraid of it. Besides he thought it immoral."

"Men change."

"Not Willy."

"All right, I'll take the picture and look around," Shayne said. "I don't know, maybe you're right."

He didn't know, but he started the slow, tedious process of checking the work of the police, digging just a little deeper than they had or could. No police force in the world can dig into a closed case without some better evidence than Shayne had. They needed some faint proof, all he had was a vague hunch and a bitter widow.

He began with Willy Reilly's room.

"I'll look it over alone. Okay?" he told the widow.

"Sure, be fair to the police," she said.

The room was small and Spartan. It was a bedroom for both the Reillys, and opened into a tiny office-like study. Shayne searched the study first. He found little. There was a small notebook with the smallest household expenses

neatly entered; a bankbook with a balance of \$1500, and no big deposits or withdrawals; a careful list of what William Reilly had intended to take on his vacation; and a budget for the vacation—a small one.

He found many small scraps of paper with notes on them. Willy Reilly had been a man who wrote notes to himself to remind him of things he had to do, or things he wanted to remember. Three of the notes were enough to make Shayne stop.

One said, "*Pick up bag, no initials.*" Another said, "*Get key made.*" And a third said simply: "*Office, about seven-thirty.*"

Shayne stared at them. Was Willy Reilly a man who had to write notes to himself to remind him that he was going to commit a robbery? Or was he simply such a man of habit that he automatically wrote notes to himself about everything?

Out in the bedroom he found nothing of any interest. The closets were neat and not crowded. One was obviously the widow's, and she was not a woman who specialized in finery. No mink coats, nothing of the kind of buying that drives a man to gambling.

Willy's own closet contained two immaculate but worn suits, a sport-jacket recently cleaned and still in its plastic bag as if ready for the trip to Key West, and two pairs of shoes. Two suitcases and two small

bags, including an attache case, were on the top shelf. Shayne looked at the small bag and attache case for some time.

He found nothing else that showed anything about the dead Willy Reilly except that he was a neat, careful, poor man and a bit of an old woman about taking good care of what he had. He searched long and carefully for the one clue a man planning an armed robbery usually leaves behind—a box of extra shells for his gun. He did not find any shells.

No shells, no tickets to far places, no hint that Will Reilly had planned any trip farther than Key West—and no notes, figures, or anything else to hint at any gambling debts. And Willy Reilly was a man who liked to keep notes.

Shayne walked out with his gray eyes deep in thought. The widow was not there to say good-by. Shayne was glad of that. He had nothing to say to her, just a slightly more uneasy hunch.

He drove first to the store, where the new key to the office had been made—the police had found it, some three blocks from the office. Close, but then, Reilly would have wanted to get it back to the desk of Roger Skell's secretary, Gwen Davis, fast.

He showed the store owner the picture of Reilly.

"Like I told the cops, that's the guy. Came in and I made a key. Happens every day."

"Then how did you remember this man so easily?"

"Who said it was easy? I had to think some, mister, only I got me a good memory."

"He must have done something special. Can you think of anything?"

"Nope. He come in with the key, asked me to make another, and waited like they all do."

"Was he nervous? In a hurry?"

"Well, about the same as all of them. Everyone's in a hurry to get a key cut, mister."

"Did he act as if he were afraid anyone would see him?"

The man thought. "I wouldn't say so. Only that's harder. I mean, I get a lot of people, like you said. Maybe I'd of noticed if he'd been looking around much."

Hoping for better results, Shayne drove to the luggage store where Reilly had bought the black bag. He showed the man in this store the picture.

"Yeah," the man said. "That's him."

"What did he ask for when he bought the bag?"

"Small, black bag about so big," the man described, and indicated that Reilly had demonstrated the size with his hands. "He had some notes about it."

"A note?" Shayne asked alertly.

"Yeah, like he'd written the size down. I asked him if he wanted it monogrammed, and he said no."

"Did he act strange in any way?"

The man scratched at his chin. "Well, no. He just looked over the bags I showed him, and picked out one. Except—"

"Except?" Shayne said.

"Well," the luggage store man said, still scratching, "there was something a little—well, different. I mean, it wasn't anything he did, just sort of a feeling I had."

"That's okay, I'll take it as just a feeling," Shayne said. "I won't even quote you."

The luggage man nodded. "Well, you know how it is when you buy something, especially a suitcase? I've watched people buy. They take a pride, you know? I mean, they act like a bag is sort of like a car. They want it to look just right, be just right. They look it over close, handle it, walk around with it to see if it feels right."

"And the man who bought the black bag didn't?"

"No, he didn't. He looked it over once and paid for it."

Shayne tugged at his ear. "You're saying maybe he wasn't buying it for himself?"

"I ain't saying anything, mister. Only it didn't look to me like he was very interested in that bag, and they usually are."

"Thanks," Shayne said.

Outside, the redhead stopped on the sidewalk and lit a cigarette. He blew smoke into the sun and



looked up and down the street. Well, what did it mean? Maybe nothing. Maybe Reilly had too much on his mind to pay much attention to a bag he was buying just to carry away loot. Or maybe it was a hell of a lot.

Was Reilly buying that bag for someone else? If so, why and who? Shayne thought about those two small bags in Reilly's closet. A small bag and an attache case, both good enough for carrying loot in. Why buy a new bag when he had two perfectly good ones already?

There could be a hundred answers. But it was the first solid question he had come up with. Had Willy Reilly bought that bag for another person? If he had—how and why had it ended up in his dead hand, full of stolen money?

Especially how?

It was one thing to make a man buy a bag for you, it was a hell of another thing to make him use it

in a robbery, run, and get himself killed.

If it had, by some remote chance, happened, how had it been done? It wasn't much to go on, but it was something. Enough for him to want to know more about the whole atmosphere.

And Skell Electronics was the place to start.

V

SHAYNE PARKED down the block and approached the office and factory on foot. The fence was there as described by Patrolman Cruse. Shayne stopped at the gate, open now and with a guard in uniform but half asleep inside, and studied the layout.

The door to the office was directly ahead, as Cruse had reported. The alley was to the right and darkly narrow. At night it would have been too dark to see beyond its mouth from outside the fence, as Cruse had stated. Nothing looked wrong for the way Cruse had described it.

Shayne walked inside the gate. The guard came to life.

"Can I help you, mister?"

"Yeah. I want to see Mr. Roger Skell."

"Appointment?"

"No."

"Okay. What's it about?"

"Just tell him it's about Willy Reilly."

The guard watched him.

"Reilly, huh? Too bad about that. I never figured little Willy for a robber. It just shows, you never know."

"You never do," Shayne agreed.

The guard went to an outside telephone. When he came back to Shayne he nodded toward the office door.

"Go on in. Miss Davis'll take you in."

Shayne met a tall, slender brunette just inside the outer door of the office. The office itself was small, with four desks. One of the desks was empty. At the others clerks worked silently. Three doors led from the room. One was marked with the name of Morton Skell, the treasurer. One had the name of G. F. Winters. The third was Roger Skell's office.

"May I ask your name, please?" the tall brunette said.

"Shayne. Mike Shayne. You're Miss Davis?"

"Yes, I am. If you'll come—"

"I'd like to ask you some questions first, if that's okay," Shayne said.

The slender woman turned back, surprised. She was a Hollywood secretary, dressed as plainly as possible, but not really hiding an elegant figure that could have made a living from its shape alone; and wearing heavy-rimmed glasses that did nothing at all to hide her beauty.

"Me, Mr. Shayne? I really

can't imagine what you could want to ask me."

"Tell me about that misplaced key. It was your key you think was duplicated?"

"My key had been moved in my desk drawer, Mr. Shayne. That is all I can say."

"When did it happen?"

"Around lunch time, perhaps a week ago. I recall particularly because I had taken a long lunch hour that day. Mr. Skell had sent me on an errand and I was gone more than two hours."

"Which Mr. Skell?"

"Mr. Roger, of course. I am his secretary."

"How many people knew you'd be gone longer than usual that day?"

"Well, I don't know. But Mr. Reilly would have. I recall mentioning it to him."

"Do you think Reilly tried to rob the office?" Shayne asked bluntly.

Miss Davis frowned. "I would have said he couldn't have even thought of such a thing, Mr. Shayne, until perhaps a month ago. That was when this man called Mr. Skell. Mr. Skell was out, and the man said he'd talk to me. He wanted to know how much Mr. Reilly was paid, and what kind of credit he had."

"What did you say?"

"That I couldn't tell him such information, of course."

"Did he identify himself?"

"No, but I didn't like what he sounded like."

"Reilly knew about where that cash was?"

"Yes. We all did."

Shayne nodded thoughtfully. "Thanks, Miss Davis. I guess I better see Mr. Skell now."

The tall brunette nodded, and led Shayne into the office of Skell Electronic's president. The office was not large, was cluttered with the activity of a growing company, and was empty. Miss Davis headed for another door at the rear of Skell's office.

"He must be in the laboratory," the slender secretary said. "Wait here, please."

Shayne studied the office as he waited. Again, the layout fitted the story of the robbery night. The windows of the office were locked with steel gates. The door out into the main office was double locked with a heavy deadfall lock. On the inner door that led to the laboratory there was a padlock—an extra-heavy combination type.

This inner door opened, and the tall Miss Davis returned with a medium-sized, burly man in a white lab smock, who walked with a limp. The man glared at Mike Shayne in annoyance.

"You want to talk to me about Reilly? Why? What can I tell you the police don't know? Who are you? Damn it, I'm busy in my laboratory!"

The words came out in a rush,

accompanied by a nervous, keyed-up series of gestures. Skell ran his fingers through his hair, chewed his lip, snapped his fingers, and glanced at a clock on his desk.

"My name's Mike Shayne," Shayne said quietly, "and I'm a private detective."

Miss Davis blinked, and Roger Skell stared.

The president swore.

"A private detective? You mean we're going to be bothered with more about Reilly? What the devil could there be to ask?"

"Let's say I'm not satisfied," Shayne said. "Do we talk?"

Roger Skell opened his mouth, then clamped it shut. He looked at the clock, and then at Shayne again. Finally, he nodded and sat down.

"Sit down, then, Mr. Shayne. You can go, Gwen."

The tall, slender brunette left quietly, closing the door behind her. Shayne sat facing Roger Skell. The president and scientist toyed with a pencil.

"Who hired you, Mr. Shayne? The widow, I suppose."

"Yes," Shayne said.

Skell nodded. "She doesn't believe Reilly was a thief. I don't blame her. Neither did I. But what else can I believe now? You've seen my statement?"

"Yeah," Shayne said. "You always had that gun around? You know how to use it?"

"Yes, to the first, but to the sec-

ond—well, I know how to use a gun about as well as most men. I carried a pistol in the war. No, hitting poor Reilly like that was just chance, Shayne. He fired at me and I fired back in reflex. I wish to God I'd missed. Reilly deserved to go to jail, but not . . . that."

"But you do keep the gun here? Where?"

"In my desk drawer. This one on the bottom, left."

Shayne watched Roger Skell pull open the drawer. "It's not locked?" he asked.

"Only when I lock my desk, which I don't do often. I keep important data in the lab, and the lab is always locked."

Shayne looked around. "A gun, barred windows, double locks. What makes you need all this security?"

"Let's just say I have electronic developments other people would like to get their hands on before I have them developed. Not the actual devices, you understand, but the principles I'm using."

"The diode-switch? The solenoid relay?"

Roger Skell smiled. "You read your reports carefully. Yes, the diode-switch is one device with a new principle I've worked out."

"And you have competitors who would like to know what you're doing?"

"Yes," Roger Skell said, and his eyes seemed to grow harder,

smaller. "You seem to have something in mind, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne rubbed his gaunt jaw. "I'm assuming that somehow, for some reason, Willy Reilly was set up. I'm trying to think of a reason for wanting Reilly to take the fall."

"You're suggesting that Reilly might have come to steal something other than the money, and he did it for someone else?"

"It's a possibility," Shayne said slowly.

"But how? I was in my laboratory. If he wanted to steal some secrets, he would have come into the lab."

"Yeah," Shayne agreed ruefully. "Have you ever maybe lost any data in the past?"

Roger Skell sat silent. His eyes studied Shayne. He seemed to be thinking. Then he got up and walked to a window. He spoke without turning around.

"I don't see why I should tell you anything like that, Mr. Shayne. What possible bearing could it have on poor Reilly?"

"I don't know what bearing it could have. I'm groping," Shayne said. "But you've already told me that you did lose something in the past."

Roger Skell turned. "No, I didn't lose anything for certain. Let's say I suspected something. A year ago, when we were about to put our first solenoid relay into production, a competitor came—"

The door to the office burst



open and a big, muscular man with a red face burst in. He stopped, stared at Shayne, then roared at Roger Skell.

"What the devil are you doing, Roger?! How do you know who this man really is?"

VI

THE CHOLERIC MAN glared angrily at Mike Shayne. His fists were clenched as if he could barely keep his hands off the redhead. Shayne smiled. Roger Skell was placating.

"Relax, Morton. Mr. Shayne is simply a private detective hired by Mrs. Reilly," Roger said.

Morton Skell snorted like a bull. "How do you know he is? He told you so, right? Roger, for God's sake, when will you come into the real world! Did you see his credentials? Did you check with the

police, or Mrs. Reilly? And now you're about to tell him our confidential affairs!"

"You can check, if you like," Shayne said to the big company treasurer. "Call Lieutenant Bellows at Homicide. I guess you know where to find Mrs. Reilly."

"Call Bellows!" Morton Skell snapped to his brother.

Roger Skell flipped his intercom. "Miss Davis, get me Lieutenant Bellows at Homicide."

While they all waited, with Morton Skell still glaring at Shayne, the redhead turned to the treasurer.

"How long had that money been in your cash file, Mr. Skell?"

"None of your damned business!"

Roger Skell said, "He can find out from the police, Morton. Tell him. If there's any doubts about Reilly, I want them cleared up."

Morton Skell growled furiously. "How can there be any doubts? Damn it, Roger, you shot the man yourself! In the act."

"Tell Shayne anyway, Morton."

Morton swore. "I had the money only that day. We don't have a safe, so we don't keep money around. I got it. It was to be paid out the next morning."

"So it wasn't around for more than a day?" Shayne asked.

"I just said so," Morton Skell snapped.

Shayne spoke quietly, "Yet from the look of the evidence

against Reilly, he had planned the robbery at least a week ago. He bought that bag, had the key copied, and got the pistol. Now, if he planned that far ahead, it couldn't have been the money he wanted, could it?"

Morton and Roger both blinked and stared at Shayne. Before they could speak, the telephone rang. Roger picked it up. He listened, and slowly put the telephone down.

"Bellows identifies Shayne. He's legitimate, and he's working for Mrs. Reilly. Satisfied, Morton?"

"No, I'm not. I say we tell him nothing! The police are completely satisfied that Reilly tried to steal our money, and you shot him. End of the affair! I say send this snooper on his way."

"Maybe you've got something to hide?" Shayne said bluntly.

The choleric brother stepped toward Shayne. The redhead rose to meet the treasurer, a grin on his gaunt face. Morton Skell stopped short.

"That'll be enough, Morton," Roger Skell said. "I think Mr. Shayne is in much better physical condition."

Morton Skell turned away and strode furiously to a window, where he stood looking out.

Roger spoke to Shayne, "My brother has nothing to hide, Mr. Shayne, believe me. And I want to help you. Now, as I said, about

a year ago we had a product ready for market when a competitor suddenly put an almost identical device out two weeks before we did. It didn't ruin us, but it cost us quite a lot in sales. It could have been a coincidence, but I had a suspicion at the time. I could find no evidence that they had stolen the idea from us."

"What competitor?" Shayne asked.

"Weldon Instruments. They're here in Miami, too. I don't much like their president, Matt Weldon, but he's a good electronics man; he could have had the same idea."

"Who's here now who was here then?" Shayne asked.

"Everyone, Mr. Shayne. We have a small staff."

"Who could possibly have access to such secrets without breaking in? Anyone who could have maybe gotten data out?"

"There's only myself, Morton, Mrs. Winters, and my assistant, Peter Andrews."

"Not Willy Reilly?"

"No. Look, Shayne, our work is highly technical, very sophisticated. To steal our secrets a person would have to have some idea of what he was stealing. The material is coded in the files. No one could locate any particular data without being able to understand it, or having the key to the code."

Shayne sighed, and slowly tugged on his ear. He was fishing and he knew it. He was starting

with the premise that Willy Reilly had somehow been setup, and was looking for a reason.

"Did you have any reason to suspect Reilly of needing money, of maybe planning anything?" he asked Roger Skell.

"No, not a shadow of a reason."

"Didn't a man call and ask about his credit, his pay?"

"No, never."

Shayne glanced at Morton Skell who was facing the room again now. "And how about you?"

"No, I never suspected," Morton said, calmed down a little. "Willy worked under me mostly. As far as I knew he was the grayest mouse of a man I ever saw. The kind who brought his lunch in a paper bag and saved the bag for tomorrow."

Shayne nodded. "That's about what they all say, until Reilly suddenly becomes a gambler and a thief. A man doesn't change that easily."

"Reilly was a silent man, Mr. Shayne," Roger Skell pointed out. "Perhaps it was the way we thought of him that was the lie. I mean, perhaps underneath he was always the gambler."

"That's possible," Shayne admitted. "Has anything happened around here, no matter how small, in the last year to make you nervous? Anything odd, unusual, unexplained?"

"No, not a damned—" Morton Skell began.

Roger interrupted. "There was that one thing, Morton. The man Mrs. Winters saw. Remember?"

"In this neighborhood?" Morton sneered. "Some bum, and Winters jumps at shadows."

"Tell me about it? When was this?" Shayne snapped.

"About a month ago," Roger Skell said. "I really don't know much, Mr. Shayne. I think you better talk to Mrs. Winters."

"Who is she?"

"Our vice president. Her late husband, Josh Winters, was my partner. He was the man who backed me, the man with the money. When he died he left his share in the business to her, and she took over his work."

"Where can I find her?"

Morton Skell said, "She's gone out. She usually has her lunch at O'Brien's Steak House. That's a few blocks away."

Shayne stood up. "Okay. If you two remember anything, let me know."

"What is there to tell, Mr. Shayne?" Roger Skell said. "I shot poor Reilly. That's all there is."

Shayne said nothing more as he left.

VII

O'BRIEN'S STEAK HOUSE was an old-fashioned building with grey columns holding up a fake Greek porch. Its windows were curtained, and a small brass plate at the door

was all that announced that it was a restaurant. There were hundreds of restaurants like it in every business district in all the cities of the country—exclusive havens in bad areas where the executives could escape the peasants.

Shayne was stopped at the door by a cold-eyed head waiter.

"Yes, sir? You have a reservation?"

"I'm not eating," Shayne said. "I'm talking. Where's Mrs. Winters?"

"I'm afraid, sir, that—"

"Don't be afraid, son," Shayne said, grinning. "I want to see Mrs. Winters of Skell Electronics. Roger Skell sent me. It's important. Now where is she?"

The frosty headwaiter hesitated. But the name of Roger Skell was probably too much weight for him. He nodded an inch and motioned for Shayne to follow him. At the rear of the dining room, the headwaiter pointed to a small table where two people sat talking low over their half-eaten lunch.

The headwaiter stalked away, and Shayne stared.

Mrs. Winters was hardly what he had expected. She sat with her eyes fixed on her companion, a man, and she wasn't a day over thirty, with the face of a model and a figure to match. Her blond hair was worn straight and shoulder-length, her features were smooth and almost perfect.

As Shayne approached her

table, and she became aware of him, she slowly turned a pair of the deepest green eyes he had ever seen toward him.

"Mrs. Winters?" he said.

"Yes, I'm Gerda Winters. Do I know you?"

"No, you don't," Shayne said.

"Mr. Skell sent me over to talk to you. The name's Shayne, Mike Shayne. I'm a private detective working for Mrs. William Reilly."

The green eyes clouded. "Poor Willy. Sit down, Mr. Shayne. Would you like a drink?"

Shayne looked up at the hovering waiter. "Sidecar, son. Easy on the cointreau."

"Which Mr. Skell sent you, Mr. Shayne?" Gerda Winters asked, her green eyes steady on his face.

"Roger."

"Poor Roger, too. He was rather shaken by killing Willy."

The youngish man, who had been watching in silence, now said, "Damned if I know why. Reilly was caught red-handed, the little punk."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne," Gerda Winters said. "This is Mr. Andrews, Roger's assistant."

"What the devil could there be to investigate?" Peter Andrews snapped at Shayne.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Shayne said mildly.

Gerda Winters laughed. "Peter is an impetuous boy, but very nice."

The stunning woman patted



Peter Andrews' hand, and Shayne realized that the elegant woman was more than thirty, but not a lot more. She had been a real beauty, and she took good care of herself. It also looked like she took good care of Peter Andrews, who had to be younger. Men who played with their female bosses always interested Shayne. They were men with an eye on the big chance.

"You're a lot younger than I expected," Shayne said to Gerda Winters bluntly. "For a vice-president."

"My husband was considerably older, Mr. Shayne," she said, "and I assure you that I'm a good vice-president. I'm the watchdog who controls Roger's enthusiasm."

"Swell," Shayne said, and looked at Peter Andrews. "You two an item?"

"Why, you—" Peter Andrews snarled.

Gerda Winters laughed aloud. "I like you, Mr. Shayne. An item? I haven't heard that phrase in years, but, yes, I suppose we are an item, eh, Peter dear?"

"If you mean am I in love with you, Gerda, the answer is yes, very much," Peter Andrews said staunchly.

"Such fervor," Gerda Winters said. "Peter is a fine, strong young man. I like strong young men, Mr. Shayne, and I have the position to indulge my likes. But you didn't come here to talk about my social life."

"No, I didn't. I came to ask you about that man you saw not long ago?"

"Man?" she frowned, then brightened. "Oh, yes, that time. It gave me a turn, let me tell you, Mr. Shayne." She cocked a fine eyebrow over those green eyes. "I can't call anyone 'mister' very long."

"Mike," Shayne said, smiling. He liked those green eyes. Peter Andrews glared. Shayne ignored the assistant. "The man you saw gave you a turn, Mrs. Winters."

"Gerda," she smiled, also ignoring Andrews. "Yes, he did. It was nothing, really, but it was quite late and I was alone. I had to return to the office unexpectedly. Just as I reached the front door I saw this man. He was in the shadows to the left, at the corner of the

building. I was inside the fence then, so it startled me terribly."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. When he saw me, he vanished. I went in as fast as I could. I was suspicious, so I looked around. I found nothing at all, no sign of anyone trying to break in. I called Peter here to come and pick me up when I left, I was that afraid."

"Did he?" Shayne asked.

Andrews said, "No, I wasn't home."

Shayne nodded. "Who did pick you up, Gerda?"

"No one. It was just before eight by then, and I remembered that the police passed each night at about eight. When I saw the patrol car I went out and ran to my car."

She stopped and watched Shayne with those green eyes. For a moment he wanted to forget all about Willy Reilly and anything else that interfered with his thoughts of Gerda Winters. But he had work to do.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all. But it was very strange for anyone to be inside the gates at that hour, and he ran when he saw me. So next day we checked the office carefully. We found no signs of anyone getting in."

"Can you tell me anything that would suggest Reilly was either really a robber or innocent?" Shayne asked.

Gerda Winters shook her head. "No, Willy was just a nice, mild little man as far as I knew, Mike."

"How about you, Andrews?"

The assistant shrugged. "To tell you true, Shayne, I never noticed Reilly much at all. He was part of the furniture when I came."

Gerda Winters smiled. "Peter is such an arrogant louse. I wonder why women like me have to like arrogant lice."

"Because arrogance is what you need, Gerda dear," Andrews said.

"When was it you came to the company?" Shayne asked.

"About a year or so ago," Andrews said. "It's a good stepping stone. Roger is a clever scientist."

"A year or so," Shayne mused. "That would be just about the time Weldon Instruments came out with the same product as Skell Electronics, right?"

Andrews colored. "If you're implying—"

Gerda Winters laughed again, and Shayne stood up as Andrews glared at him. He grinned down at the assistant.

"I'll see you both around," he said, and stalked out of the restaurant.

In his car he watched the door of the steak house for a time, but no one came out. He was beginning to feel more sure that something was not exactly right about the whole affair. And the heart of the case against Willy Reilly was Sanchez Batista the gambler.

VIII

SANCHEZ BATISTA operated his book and his other gambling enterprises out of an old roadhouse just south of Miami on the highway to the Keys.

On his way south, Shayne thought about Batista. The gambler was not your run-of-the-mill bookmaker, lurking around street corners and candy stores to take dollar bills. No, Batista was an area book, and the little men came to him with their cash from the suckers. The police figured that Batista handled some two hundred small bookies, but they had never proven it.

On the other hand, Batista was known to take bets at the roadhouse, usually big ones, and it looked like that was how Reilly had got in so deep. Which was—

The car seemed to come out of nowhere.

Behind Mike Shayne, right out of the sun, on top of him in the rear before he was aware that anything was within a hundred yards.

Thunk!

Hit in the rear, Shayne's car jolted and slewed. To the right the highway bordered thick groves of trees. To the left across the highway there was a swampy land.

Thunk-thunk!

The crashes from the rear hurled his car along, half out of control, and Shayne gripped the wheel hard and pressed down on

the accelerator. He tried to see in his mirror the face in the car behind him, but all he could see was a shape and sun glinting on a tinted windshield. Whoever was in the car had the sun visor down and was wearing a hat pulled low.

Thunk!

He was up to eighty, and the car behind never fell back. It was faster than his car. Sooner or later one of the smashing blows was going to send his car off the road. He could not escape by speed. Therefore, he had to do something else, and fast.

His gray eyes were cool as he considered his move. If he hit his brakes at this speed he would probably flip. If not, the car behind would knock him off the road. It would probably flip itself, but that wouldn't do Shayne much good.

At high speed, the pursuing car creeping up for another smashing blow, the redhead analyzed his course. He could pull off to the right, but there were the trees. He could pull to the left—into oncoming cars.

He decided. The car behind pulled close again.

Thunk-thunk!

And the car fell back. Shayne tapped his brake, slowed. The car behind bumped him hard—*Thunk!* He held on, and the car dropped back again.

Shayne slowed more.

When he was down to fifty,

the car behind pulled out to come up beside him and force him off the road.

He hit the brake, slewed, pulled to the shoulder as the pursuing car swept past—and saw the concrete abutment of a culvert bridge directly ahead!

He couldn't wait to think. He swung the wheel hard to the right, plunged through trees grimly hanging on, sideswiped one big truck, fishtailed, and plunged down into the culvert with a sickening crash.

He was lucky. The careening through the trees had slowed his car, the fishtailing had slowed it more, and when it pitched into the culvert it was caught by the branches of a tree and tore through to hit, not head-on but its right side.

Shayne hung tight to the wheel, and his seat belt held, and as the car shuddered to a stop on its side, wheels spinning, he found himself suspended by the belt inside the shattered glass and steel.

Stunned, he hung there for a moment, while he heard voices shouting up on the highway as cars stopped.

He smelled gasoline.

Shaking himself out of shock, he quickly unbuckled the seat belt. The door wouldn't give.

The first flame licked up somewhere to the rear.

Shayne slammed upward at the door. It was broken shut. He

waited no longer and went out through the shattered windshield in a dive.

He landed on his shoulder on the ground, rolled, and came up running.

Behind him the gas tank exploded and a sheet of flame flared up in the sunny afternoon.

Shayne fell to the ground and covered his head. Metal and stones flew. After a moment it subsided, and Shayne sat up.

The car burned fiercely. People were coming down the bank, A State Police car was up on the road. Shayne ignored everything and examined himself.

He didn't have a cut or even a bruise!

There was no blood, nothing broken, and, somehow, he had even crashed out through the shattered windshield without tearing a thread of his clothes.

He was shaking now, but he didn't have a scratch. Shayne knew that it could happen that way—an accident that will kill one man leaves another untouched.

Except that this had been no accident.

Someone didn't like what he was doing, and it sure wasn't Willy Reilly. Then who was it and why?

The people reached him now and crowded around. He assured them he was okay. A policeman appeared to ask questions. Shayne explained who he was, and some of what had happened, and the

trooper decided that it was a little too much for him.

"I think you better come to the barracks with me, Mr. Shayne."

"That's what I want, too," Shayne agreed.

He needed a car, and he rode to the barracks with the troopers. It took him twenty minutes to explain what had happened to the lieutenant. After a check with Miami, the lieutenant took his statement and turned him loose. By that time Shayne had called Lucy Hamilton, and a car was waiting for him outside.

He started back the way he had come in the now late afternoon sun. This time he kept his eyes open, and nothing happened. He had a picture of the car that had tried to kill him in his mind. It was a new, black Buick with a spotlight on the left front window. He would remember it.

There were few cars parked at the roadhouse where Sanchez Batista operated his affairs. Shayne pulled up at the front door and strode inside. A tall, slim man glided out of the shadows.

"You got business, sir?" the slim man said quietly.

Shayne eyed him. His teeth were beautiful and his shoulders were strongly slender under an immaculately cut dinner jacket. His hair was neat and smooth, his features handsome and unmarred, his fingers long and clean. He looked like a young Ivy League executive.

But he had a faint bulge under his arm, and a wariness in the eye, that told Shayne he was a muscle boy, a gunman, a bodyguard. One of the new, modern breed of hard muscle.

"With Batista," Shayne said, looking the smooth hood up and down.

"No, sir," the handsome boy said politely, "with me, and I don't do business with strangers."

"Neither do I, son," Shayne said equally politely. "I'm no stranger to Sanchez, and he's no stranger to me. You just tell him Mike Shayne wants to see him, and soon."

"I don't believe so," the hood said, less politely. "Beat it, mister."

Shayne clucked. "Watch your shine, son. It's slipping. What happened to the *sir*?"

The handsome hood reddened, clenched a fist, stepped at Shayne. Shayne sighed loudly, and shook his head.

"You must be new. Didn't you hear me say I'm a friend of Sanchez's? Now you don't want to muss me up before you find out if I am, do you?"

The wariness in the cold eyes returned. It was the eyes that gave the boy away for the punk he was under the veneer. He hesitated. Shayne moved quickly past him toward the door to Batista's private office.

"Why you crummy—" The boy lunged after Shayne.

Shayne pivoted, caught the



LUCY HAMILTON

hood's arm, turned him, and threw him against a wall. The boy hit the wall with his face, bounced back and fell flat, whirled on the floor and came out with his pistol. Shayne was waiting. He kicked the gun away, and stood with his fists ready.

The boy glared hate up from the floor.

"Proud of yourself, Shayne?" A voice said behind Shayne.

IX

SANCHEZ BATISTA stood in his open doorway with two more of his boys beside him. Batista was smil-

ing; the two bodyguards weren't. Batista looked at the boy, who was still on the floor.

"Get up, Rudi. Mr. Shayne won't bother you now. Will you, Mike?"

"The boy needed a lesson, Sanchez. He throws weight before he knows whether there's a reason to throw weight or not," Shayne said. "This way, he'll remember me next time."

Batista still smiled. "You hear that, Rudi? Listen to Mr. Shayne. He's been around a long time."

"Longer than you, Sanchez," Shayne said.

"He's right, Rudi," Sanchez said. "Shayne's a fair man, but a tough one. He treats a man right and fair. I'm always in to Shayne. You remember him, Rudi boy."

The boy was up, dusting himself off. The punk had nerve. He slowly retrieved his pistol, checked it, holstered it under his arm and looked at Shayne.

"I'll remember, Mr. Batista," Rudi said. "In case you want to know, Mr. Shayne, my full name is Rudolph Grass. I'll be talking to you again. Rudi Grass."

Grass turned and walked back to his post at the door. Sanchez Batista laughed.

"It's really Rudi Grasselli, but he changed it in college. A real smart boy. I got plans for him."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "I'll bet. Can we talk, Sanchez?"

"Sure, sure. Come on in."

The swarthy little gambler led Mike Shayne into his private office and waved the two bodyguards out. When the door had closed, Batista lit a cigar and offered one to Shayne. Shayne declined.

"Tell me about William Reilly," Shayne said.

"So?" Batista said, "that's the pitch? Reilly? Who hires you to work on that penny-ante heister?"

"Was he a heister, Sanchez?"

"The cops say so. I believe the cops."

"The cops can be wrong."

"Sure, who knows better?"

"Did Reilly look like an armed robbery type to you?"

"Me?" Sanchez raised an eyebrow. "I never saw the guy."

"You had his paper. For ten thousand dollars. That's not cereal."

Sanchez nodded and looked annoyed. "You bet it ain't. Only I don't take bets personal, you know that."

"Your books don't take markers that high."

"Hell no, he played out here. Only not with me personal. Look, after he gets his, it's in the papers, right? So next day my manager comes to me with this paper. Ten grand the punk owed. It's the limit, and the manager was ready to go to Rudi about it. Rudi takes it to me. I give the manager hell for letting it go so high without coming to me."

"Why did he?"

Batista puffed on his cigar. "He tells me it wasn't so high, but the punk lost a big wad trying to double up. Just two days before he tries the knockover! When it got that high, and Reilly couldn't pay, my manager got scared. Reilly said he'd make it good fast, so the manager took a chance on not coming to me. It was his mistake. He don't work here no more."

Shayne scowled in the office. "Damn it, everywhere I turn it all has a stink. I mean, Reilly did all the things he's supposed to have, only it all smells funny. How many times has one of your managers let a man ride like that without telling?"

"Maybe once before," Batista admitted.

"Yeah, possible, but not probable. It's that way all down the line. Everything about what Reilly did is possible, but it's not probable for a man like that."

Batista shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"Did the police check the markers for his signature?"

"Sure. They said it checked out."

"And Reilly was shot dead in front of a policeman," Shayne said, "yet he just wasn't the type for armed robbery."

"You got a problem," Batista said.

Shayne chewed his lip. "Do you know a Matt Weldon?"

"No, never heard of him."

"How about anyone named Skell?"

"Just that this Roger Skell gunned Reilly. Nothing else."

Shayne stood up. "Okay, Sanchez, and thanks."

"Any time, Shayne."

Shayne walked out and through the roadhouse that was still quiet at this early hour. The flashy gunman, Rudi Grass, did not show himself, and the redhead grinned.

He got into his rented car and started back for Miami. He was not happy. It had been a long day, and it didn't look much better than when it had begun. So far, he had proved absolutely nothing against the police conviction that Willy Reilly had been shot in a robbery attempt.

But he had a lot of uneasy feeling. As he had told Batista, the whole chain of events had an improbable ring. All down the line it didn't feel right.

Willy Reilly, a man with a record for doing nothing much at all, had tried an armed robbery.

Reilly, who never spent an extra penny in his life, had lost \$10,000 on the horses.

The stolen money had been in the Skell Electronic office for one day—but Reilly seemed to have planned his robbery for over a week.

Reilly bought a bag when he had two perfectly good bags, and Reilly had acted as if he were

buying the bag for someone else.

Reilly had had tickets for a show that night, and had told his wife he had to go to the office for a while. To rob it? He had written notes to himself. One of them said to go to the office about 7:30.

It all added to one hell of an improbable robbery, but it was all possible. And in the face of seeming facts and eye-witnesses all the improbabilities faded into nothing. Reilly *had* been killed in a robbery attempt. Period.

Only Shayne didn't think so. Not now. Not with all the doubts. Not with someone wanting him dead.

Then what had happened to Reilly—and why?

There was only one other possibility that he knew about—Skell Electronic's secret data. Which meant that he was about to pay a visit on Matt Weldon of Weldon Instruments.

X

IT WAS ALMOST closing time at the shabby factory of Weldon Instruments. The workers were trickling out through the gates, and the parking lot was emptying. Mike Shayne parked and went up to the guard at the gate.

"Mr. Matt Weldon," he said.

The bored guard yawned. "Third door on the left. That's the front office. Ask anyone in there."

Shayne went to the door and

into a plush business office in sharp contrast to the shabby factory. The female clerks barely glanced at him, too busy with their five o'clock make-up. After a few coughs and grunts he finally got an elderly harpy to look at him.

"Yeah?"

Matt Weldon ran a very sloppy



ship with a big fat front. It looked like Skell's estimate of Weldon might be right. A sharp outfit that substituted clever operating for solid work.

"I want to see Matt Weldon," Shayne told the harpy.

"He ain't in."

A blonde looked up from her mirror. "Yes he is, Grace. I mean, he been in and he ain't come out."

"Yeah?" the harpy said. "What's your name?"

The last was to Shayne, who told her his name. She flipped a switch and asked for Weldon. There was no answer. She shrugged.

"Maybe he's in the john. You wanna wait, you can."

With that the harpie, the

blonde, and two other ladies tripped out of the office, gabbling.

Shayne sat down to wait. After a time, when no one came back, he started to look around the corridors. A tall man saw him.

"You want someone?"

"Matt Weldon."

"Matt?" the man frowned. "I haven't seen him for a while. I think he's gone."

"The ladies said he was in."

"Yeah. Well, try his office. At the end of the corridor."

Shayne went to the end of the corridor. A door was marked: *President*. Shayne entered and found an outer office with no one in it and the typewriter covered for the night. He crossed it and went through a door marked: *Private*.

The inner office was empty. Shayne looked around. Papers on the desk looked as though Weldon were still working. A drawer was open. The desk chair was pushed back as if Weldon had just gotten up.

Shayne frowned, and listened. Water was running. It sounded like water in a sink. It seemed to come from behind a door in the right wall of Weldon's office. Shayne listened at the door. The water was running in what must be a small, private bathroom.

"Weldon?" Shayne called.

There was no answer. The water continued to run. Shayne banged on the door.

"Weldon?!"

There was no sound inside the bathroom except the steady running of water in a sink. Shayne tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened it.

A small, fat man sat huddled on the floor in a corner of the room. The water ran in an empty sink. Shayne bent down over the huddled man. A single wound in his head showed what had happened. The man was dead, shot once through the head at close range.

Shayne stood up. He had little doubt that he had found Matt Weldon. But to be sure he gingerly searched the huddled body. A wallet identified the man: Matt Weldon. And he had been dead less than an hour, probably no more than fifteen or twenty minutes.

Shayne's gray eyes shrank to points like stone. He had no doubts now—there was more than a simple robbery involved, and Willy Reilly had not died for being a thief.

Matt Weldon had been killed quickly, hurriedly and very recently. Why? To shut him up; to keep him from talking to anyone, especially to Shayne. Someone didn't want Shayne to find out anything.

Grimly, the redhead went back into the office and began to search. He kept his ears open. He did not want to be found with the body.

The files yielded nothing he could interpret as suspicious. He

was thinking that he might have to get Skell to look at the files, when he found a locked drawer in the desk. He broke it open.

He found a file, unmarked, and in it photostats of some device he could not recognize—but he recognized the single word *diode*. He took the file, closed the drawer, and left the office quietly.

There was no one in the corridor, and he reached the main office without being seen. The main office was deserted. He went out to the parking lot and to his car. No one saw him. He drove out of the lot, and headed fast for the small home of the dead Willy Reilly.

XI

MRS. REILLY opened the door. When she saw Mike Shayne's face, her dull eyes seemed to light up.

"You've found something, Mr. Shayne?" she asked, watching his grim face.

"I think so," he said, walking past her into the small, drab living room. He turned to her as she followed him in. "Was Willy worried about anything? Think hard. Was he in any way different the last week or so?"

"Different? No, I don't remember—"

"Think!" Shayne snapped. "Anything. Did he act like he had anything on his mind? Did he say anything at all strange? Anything you didn't understand?"

"You think someone killed Willy because he knew something?" she cried, staring at Shayne.

"Maybe. In fact, I'm sure of it now."

"But how? Mr. Skell shot—. You think it was Mr. Skell? He framed Willy, made him run, and then shot him down in cold blood?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Reilly. I need your help. If Skell had a reason to kill your husband, I've got to know it. Did Willy say anything about trouble in the office?"

Mrs. Reilly sat down, her gray face a study in concentration as she seemed to be trying to remember the last few weeks. Shayne waited. Mrs. Reilly sighed.

"Willy was a quiet man, Shayne. We didn't have what you would call a talking marriage. We sort of just were together. But—well, Willy might have been a little pre-occupied the last few weeks. I didn't want to mention it before, because—"

"Because the police, and maybe me, would only have taken it as a sign that Willy has something like a robbery on his mind," Shayne said.

Mrs. Reilly nodded. "Yes, and anyway, I can't say what he had on his mind. He just seemed worried. He did say, once, something a little strange."

Mrs. Reilly stopped and closed her eyes as if trying to remember exactly what her dead husband had said that was strange.

"Just give me what you remember," Shayne said.

She nodded. "It was something about a very peculiar young man. He wondered if Mr. Roger knew about it, but maybe he shouldn't stick his nose in."

"What did Willy mean by 'it'?"

"That I don't know. He was just sort of talking to himself, I think," Mrs. Reilly said. "Only, there was something else, now that I think about it. Just a week before it happened, he said something about late work being pretty odd."

"Whose late work?"

"He didn't say. Maybe it was all nothing, Mr. Shayne. Willy often just talked about little things at the office."

"Could he have meant Roger Skell's late work?"

"Maybe, how would I know?"

"All right," Shayne said. "Where does Roger Skell live?"

"In Miami Beach."

She gave him the address. In his car he drove through Miami and across the causeway into the glitter of Miami Beach. Roger Skell's address was a good apartment house in a good section of the Beach.

Shayne rang the bell, and Morton Skell opened the door.

"You again! What the devil do you want now?"

"The same thing, Skell," Shayne said pushing inside past the big, choleric man. "Where's your brother?"

"I'm not his keeper. That's the Bible, in case you can read, snooper."

"What are you? Cain or Abel?"

"Just my smart brother's roommate," Morton said. "You look like a man with a vision. Did you find anything?"

"Yeah, I found that someone doesn't like what I'm doing, and Willy Reilly's dead, so it can't be him."

"Meaning?"

"It means, Skell, that whatever is going on, whether Reilly was involved in it or not, it didn't end with his death."

Morton Skell stared at the red-head. Then the big treasurer sat down slowly. His red face drained a little of color. He twisted his fingers together.

"You're saying maybe there was another reason for Reilly's death?" Skell asked.

"Yes."

"And my brother shot him, so my brother must be involved?"

"You said it, I didn't. Tell me, just how valuable is that new diode switch?"

"You mean to other people? Very. It could be worth a lot to the right people. You see, Shayne, Roger is something of an electronic genius. His ideas are very advanced."

"Weldon Instruments would want the diode-switch?"

"The idea behind it, yes. But Weldon's pretty small apples. I can

think of bigger fish who'd drool to get that diode idea."

"Who's been working late the last few weeks?"

"In the office, you mean? Well, all of us, I guess, off and on. I worked late myself a week or so ago, a new idea I had for some buying procedures."

"On your own, then? You didn't have to work late for the company?"

"On my own, yes."

"If I asked you about a very peculiar young man, would it mean anything to you?"

"You mean specifically? No, nothing I can think of."

"Do you know Matt Weldon? Maybe you went to see him today?"

"I know Weldon, naturally. I don't usually talk to him."

"How about Roger?"

"And Weldon? He hates the little man's guts."

Shayne scratched his jaw. "How is Roger fixed for money? Maybe he could use personal money? I take it the bosomy Mrs. Winters owns a big share of Skell Electronics."

"She does. Too much. Her husband put up the money, and Roger did all the work. But Roger wouldn't sell his own ideas under the table, if that's what you're driving at."

"Would you?"

Morton grew beet red again. "You get out of here, Shayne. I

don't think you've learned a damned thing!"

"I'm going. Where's Roger?"

"I don't know. Probably at the office, working in his lab again."

Shayne had a sudden thought. "Tell me, Morton, would Roger maybe work on something in secret? I mean, something he doesn't intend to give the company, but keep all himself? Does he really have to work late for the diode-switch?"

"You go to hell!"

Shayne watched the big man. With someone like Morton Skell there was no way of telling if he had something to hide, or was just plain bad-tempered.

Shayne walked out. As he walked to his car he thought about his idea that Roger Skell could be holding out on Mrs. Winters. It could also work the other way. Maybe Peter Andrews was working on some sort of tricks for, and with, Mrs. Winters.

Someone had stolen the secrets of the diode-switch, and maybe more, and given them to Matt Weldon. Someone who then killed Matt Weldon to silence him because Shayne was digging too deep. Some one who had tried to kill him, Shayne, because Willy Reilly's death was connected somehow.

But how?

XII

IT WAS GROWING dark by the time Mike Shayne arrived at the

office and plant of Skell Electronics. Once again he parked up the street and approached on foot. The gate was closed, but there was a light in the rear of the office building, about where Roger Skell's laboratory would be.

A shadow moved in the rear of the narrow alley where Willy Reilly had died.

Shayne crouched down in the dusk near the fence. He watched the shadow moving back in the alley. Whoever it was seemed to be studying the ground, the walls, and the general layout, looking up and down the alley.

Shayne watched, and the figure suddenly walked to the rear of the alley and around the rear corner. Shayne was up and swarming over the fence in seconds. He dropped like a cat on the other side, and moved quickly up the alley.

In the darkness between the buildings, Shayne glided on toward the far end, as quiet as a giant cat as he moved. He reached the end, started to peer around, and drew back. He heard voices. One was a woman's voice.

"Well?" the woman said low.

"Nothing. I can't find a thing. You really think that Roger is playing with us?"

"Shayne thinks something," the woman's voice said. Mike Shayne recognized it now—Gerda Winters.

"He's fishing for shadows," the man said—Peter Andrews.

"I'm not so sure. I think he's a pretty smart man, Peter. He doesn't buy the whole story of how Reilly got killed."

"What else can he buy? I mean, damn it, Gerda, it's open and shut. The police closed the whole case."

"If it stays closed," Gerda Winters said softly, and then her voice rose a hair. "There's someone in the alley, Peter. Now!"

Andrews whirled and rushed at the mouth of the alley, a long length of pipe in his hand. Shayne stepped out. The assistant snarled and swung the pipe. Shayne caught the wrist in one big hand, and twisted hard. The pipe dropped to the ground as Andrews screamed in pain.

Shayne bent the assistant, but Andrews slipped around and aimed a hard kick at the redhead. The kick missed. Shayne dropped the assistant's arm and chopped a short left and right to the jaw. Andrews sprawled on his back in the dirt.

"Hold it there, mister!"

Gerda Winters stood in the darkness, a small pistol in her hand aimed straight at Shayne. The redhead stopped. Gerda stepped cautiously to the fallen Andrews, her green eyes black over the shiny gun. Then she peered at Mike Shayne, and laughed.

"Get up, Peter dear. It's only Mr. Shayne. Hello, Mike. You doing a little snooping too?"

"That's what I'm paid for. What are you two doing?"

Andrews staggered up holding his jaw. "None of your—"

"Now, Peter, we have nothing to hide from Mike," Gerda said calmly and gave Shayne a dazzling smile. "As a matter of fact, we got to thinking about your idea that Willy Reilly just wasn't the thief type. It occurred to us to wonder if Roger had shot him for some other reason, so we came to look around on the sly."

"What other reason could Roger have had?" Shayne asked.

"Tell him, Peter," Gerda Winters said.

The assistant was still holding his bruised jaw, but he said, "That diode-switch concept is more valuable than Roger's told anyone. I don't think he has to work late as often as he does just to get it ready."

Gerda said, "In other words, Peter and I wonder if Roger isn't trying some hanky-panky. After all, if he develops it for the company he shares only about thirty percent of the profits. It's quite possible that a shrewd man like Roger might have some more lucrative scheme in mind, while still making the switch for us as well."

"Do you have any evidence beside a hunch?"

Andrews shrugged. "Only that about a week and a half ago I came in one morning and found the diode papers filed out of place a little. As if Roger had used them, and put them back in a hurry."

"Doesn't he often use them?"

"Sure," Andrews said, "but I happen to know he was working on something else that night. He had no reason to have them out."

"Except that incident a year ago with Weldon Instruments," Gerda Winters said. "I wondered at the time about Roger being quite so willing to accept the possibility of coincidence. As a matter of fact, I think I'd like to have someone keep an eye on Roger. Would you care to take the job, Mike?"

"I have a client," Shayne said.

"Well," Gerda said, "if you change your mind, you can find me easily enough."

She smiled at Shayne, and nodded to Andrews. Shayne watched them walk around the building to a car. It was not a black, new Buick.

When they had gone Shayne tugged slowly on his ear. Their story could be true, or it could be a quick cover for what they were really up to. Gerda Winters struck him as a pretty shrewd woman. And Andrews was a "peculiar young man" in many ways.

Shayne waited until they were gone, then he went around to the front and into the office. There was no one in sight, so he started for the door to Roger Skell's office. He heard a noise, and Miss Davis came out of Morton Skell's office. She seemed startled.

"Oh! You gave me a start, Mr. Shayne. Can I help you?"

"Is Morton Skell here, Miss Davis?"

"No, I—Oh, I was simply putting some reports on his desk. Have you found anything important?"

"Not much," Shayne admitted. "Do you often work late?"

"No," Gwen Davis said, smiling. "As little as possible. Every now and then, when he works late, Mr. Skell asks me to stay, too. I really hate it. As a matter of fact, I'm just leaving. Do you want to see Mr. Roger?"

"You go ahead. I'll let myself in."

"Knock on the lab door. He keeps it locked."

"I'll announce myself, too," Shayne said grimly. "He also keeps a gun."

Gwen Davis seemed to shudder as she began to gather up her things. Shayne went into Roger Skell's office. It was empty, but there was light under the door of the laboratory. Shayne knocked on the door, and announced, "Skell? Mike Shayne."

There was movement inside the lab. "What? Shayne? Oh, yes. Just a minute."

After a few moments of banging of glass and metal, the door opened, and Roger Skell blinked out at Shayne.

"Mr. Shayne? What do you want? Have you learned something?"

"Maybe. Can I come in?"



"What?" Roger blinked. "Oh, yes, of course. Forgive me. When I work I might as well be in China. Do come in."

Shayne looked around the cluttered laboratory. An intricate electronic set-up was on the main lab bench, with parts and pieces scattered everywhere.

Shayne nodded to the complicated arrangement. "The diode-switch?"

"Yes, part of it. Do you understand electronics?"

"No, but I can read," Shayne said. He took the photostatic copy of data he had found in Weldon's desk and handed it to Roger Skell.

"You know what this is?" the redhead asked.

Roger looked at it, looked at

Shayne. "It's a copy of my preliminary data on the diode-switch. Where did you get it?"

"In Matt Weldon's office."

"Weldon! Why that dirty—But how? How did he get this? That data never left this lab!"

"Apparently it did," Shayne said dryly.

"Impossible!" Roger Skell cried, then stared at the proof in his hands. "What did Weldon say? Did he tell you how he got this? I want to talk to that man!"

"That's going to be difficult."

"Difficult? Why? I'll make—"

"Weldon's dead."

Roger Skell stared at Shayne, and sat down slowly.

XIII

THE SCIENTIST looked up at Mike Shayne. "Then there's more to this than it seemed? Reilly was just after the money? He was stealing my data?!"

"Someone was," Shayne said. "Have you been to see Weldon today, Skell?"

"Me? You think I might have killed Weldon? Why? Because he had this diode data? I'm not a killer, Mr. Shayne."

"No?" Shayne said. "Maybe you were selling your own ideas twice, Roger. Maybe Weldon knew that. Maybe you got rid of him because he knew too much and you had a better deal. I've been told that your diode-switch is something a

lot of bigger companies would want."

Roger Skell watched Shayne, his eyes steady. "Yes, a lot of companies could use my ideas, but I'm not cheating on my own company and I didn't kill Weldon. I don't kill people, Shayne."

"Except Willy Reilly," Shayne said bluntly. "You killed him."

"Yes, I killed Reilly. I wish I hadn't. No matter what he was doing, it wasn't worth stopping him that way."

Shayne watched the scientist. Roger was the logical suspect, the killer of Reilly, yet Shayne found it hard to believe that Reilly had been involved in anything. No, his murder had been something different from what it appeared to be. And that just about ruled out Roger.

Unless the president and Reilly had been in some scheme together and Roger had arranged the whole killing to get Reilly out of the way. Had the president decoyed Reilly into some act and then shot him down?

Shayne was sure of one thing by now anyway—someone had fooled Willy Reilly and set him up to be murdered! And the reason was the diode-switch.

"All right," Shayne said to Roger Skell, "let's take another look at how you say you killed Reilly."

"Haven't we been over that enough? I think we should find out how this diode data got to Weldon.

Damn it, that's more important now than poor Willy."

"I think they're the same thing, Skell," Shayne said. "Now let's hear it all again."

"I was in my lab. I heard a noise," Roger explained again as Shayne listened carefully. "I went out into the main office and saw the door to Morton's office open. That was unusual. I was sure it had been closed earlier. I went back into my office and got my gun from my desk."

"Was the drawer unlocked, where you kept the gun?"

"Yes."

"Was the gun where it was supposed to be?"

Roger Skell frowned. "As far as I know it was. I rarely even looked at it."

"Okay. Go on."

"I went back out with the gun. When I reached the main office I saw this sort of shadow running for the outside door. He had a bag in his hand and he was masked. That's all I could see."

"How was he dressed?"

"Dressed? Well, he had on a gray summer suit, a white shirt and striped tie, black shoes—"

"You saw all this in the dark office?"

"Roger Skell blinked at Shayne. "Why, no, I guess I didn't. That was what Reilly was wearing when we found him in the alley. In the office I guess all I saw was dark clothes and a white shirt. He was

moving fast and out the door before I got much of a look."

"Yeah," Shayne agreed. "Go on."

Roger seemed to think, then went on. "I shouted and chased him out. He ran left. I heard someone yell for him to stop, and saw Patrolman Cruse outside the gates. Cruse chased along the fence. Reilly stopped at the mouth of the alley, and shot at me. I was hit in the leg and went down."

"Reilly shot at Cruse. Cruse dropped down, and Reilly went for the alley. I shot twice. Reflex, I guess. I never meant to shoot, really. Reilly vanished into the alley, and Cruse came over the fence and ran after him. As you know, he found Willy shot through the heart."

Roger Skell stopped. Shayne tugged at his ear and then rubbed at his jaw. "And you're not a good shot?"

"Only fair."

"It all happened very fast," Shayne mused. "Yet there was a fair amount of time, maybe a minute between you shooting at Reilly, and Patrolman Cruse finding him. Maybe more than a minute."

"Yes," Roger Skell said.

Shayne nodded. "Okay, come on. Let's have a look at the scene again."

They went out through the main office that was dark and empty now, and into the yard behind the fence.



Shayne saw the movement outside the fence, and the black car, out of the corner of his eye as they walked out. He had an instant premonition.

He pushed Roger Skell and dived for the ground.

Two shots rang out in quick, but careful succession.

The bullets slammed into the wall of the building and whined hissing away into the night.

Shayne rolled to Roger Skell, who lay wide-eyed on the cement of the yard. He pushed the company president into the deep shadows of the building wall.

Two more shots exploded. Bullets kicked off the cement of the yard and bounced up to strike chips from the wall. Shayne had his automatic out now. The red-head pumped two shots at the distant car. His heavy .45 boomed like a cannon in the dark night.

"The alley, quick!" Shayne yelled.

He pumped off another shot, pushed Roger Skell up, and the two men ran for the alley. They tumbled into the sheltering darkness of the walls. Shayne crouched and peered back. The black car was pulling away—a black Buick and new!

Shayne stood up. His gray eyes glinted in the night. Someone wanted something very much—and he was pretty sure that what was wanted was the diode-switch data.

XIV

MIKE SHAYNE SAID, "Okay, he's gone!"

Roger Skell stood up and looked around as if not sure he could believe what had happened. The shots had brought no one to look in the deserted factory area—not yet. But a siren was already wailing in the distance and coming closer.

"Who was it? Who was he trying to kill?" Roger Skell cried.

"I don't know. Maybe both of us. I think whoever it is wants your diode data and is pretty desperate to get it now."

"But who, Shayne? And how the devil does Reilly fit into it all?"

"I'm not sure, but I've got a hunch," Shayne said. "Quick, before the cops get here, show me what happened after you came out the door chasing the masked man."

Roger Skell returned to the door. "I came out the door. He was there to the left, running. Cruse was at the gate yelling at Reilly. I ran after him. He turned and shot, and—"

"He was still masked?"

"Yes."

"Did you get a good look at him? I mean, you knew Willy Reilly pretty well. Even masked you might have recognized him if you'd had a good look."

"But I didn't. It all happened so fast, and in the dark."

"All right, what then?" the red-head said.

"He shot me in the leg. I fell. He shot at Cruse. So I shot."

"From where?"

"Here," and Roger indicated a spot some twelve yards from the mouth of the alley.

Shayne lay down and looked. There was a wall some fifty yards beyond the mouth of the alley. When a man fires from the ground upward he has a tendency to shoot high. From where Shayne lay there were windows, painted black, and other patterns on the wall behind where Reilly would have been standing. Almost as good as camouflage.

"You shot," Shayne said. "Did you think you'd hit? Was there any sign you'd hit him? Did he grunt, cry out, stagger?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I wasn't sure when I fired if he hadn't already reached inside the

alley. I mean, I fired and he vanished almost at the same time."

The police siren was very close now, slowing for the turn into the street. Shayne's gray eyes were hard and narrowed. He started toward the alley.

"Come on."

Roger Skell followed him, but he did not stop at the alley! Instead, he went on all the way to the far wall that had been behind Willy Reilly when Skell had shot. Roger followed with a puzzled frown. Shayne reached the wall and began to examine it closely.

As he studied the wall about ten feet up, shining his flashlight carefully on the wall, the police car arrived outside the gate. Roger Skell left to let them in. They came with their guns out to where Shayne was still staring up at the wall.

"What's going on around here, Mr. Skell?" one of the patrolmen said. "Another robbery?"

Shayne looked at the officer. "Someone tried to kill Mr. Skell and myself. Are you Cruse?"

"That's right," Patrolman Cruse said. "Who are you?"

"Mike Shayne. Did you look at this wall before?"

"The wall?" Cruse said, looking up. "Why?"

"Skell fired twice at Reilly. The second shot should have hit this wall."

"Does it matter?" Cruse asked.

"Yeah, it matters, because I

think two bullets hit this wall, not one. I think we better go have a talk with Lieutenant Bellows."

Cruse looked upward. "Two? How the hell can you be sure, Shayne? I see a lot of scars on that wall."

"There are two pretty close together at just about the height they would have hit from the distance," Shayne said. "I could be wrong, but if what I'm thinking is right, then two shots had to hit this wall. Let's see Bellows. Roger, you better stay here, and stay alert. Lock up the office and stay inside."

"You think that man who shot at you might come back?" Patrolman Cruse asked.

"I think he'll be back," Shayne said. "But I'm not sure it'll be tonight."

"I better leave a man here anyway," Cruse said.

One of the patrolmen took up a post watching the gate and front door, and Roger Skell went back inside to his laboratory.

Mike Shayne followed Cruse down to headquarters where Lieutenant George Bellows was in his office. Bellows studied Shayne as the redhead sat down and Cruse left.

"You look like a man who's discovered the pot of gold," Bellows said.

"Maybe I have," Shayne said grimly. "I think I know what happened to Willy Reilly, and it didn't

have anything to do with a twenty thousand dollar robbery."

"Tell me."

"No, not yet. You wouldn't believe me, and I don't know who is behind it all yet."

"What do you want, Mike?" Bellows said.

Shayne leaned forward. "George, I think that what's behind it all is a big deal to steal and sell industrial data. I think there's plenty involved, and that whoever is handling it won't stop now."

"You want to set a trap?"

Shayne nodded. "That's it, George. But it'll have to be a good one."

"I better get the Chief in on this."

Gentry was called, and Shayne and Bellows went up to the Chief's office. Gentry listened to what Shayne had to say and then scowled over his cold cigar.

"It could be damned dangerous, Mike. This guy's tried to kill you twice already," Gentry said, and watched the redhead. "We found a guy named Matt Weldon about an hour ago. People there described a man who visited Weldon. It was you, Mike, Right?"

"Yeah, I was going to report it now. I had to move fast, Will."

"Okay, but this isn't mah jong. We've got a real killer. What makes you think he'll still go on with trying to get the diode data now?"

"I think he's the type. He's

killed to cover up, but he'll go on after his deal. Do we set it up, Will?"

"Okay, Mike. How?" the police chief said.

"First, we get Roger Skell to tell around his office that the diode is ready, and that he's made some major changes that make it even more important. He'll play excited, eager, this is the big item deal. Then he'll mention that he's worried about someone stealing the data, so he's hired me to guard it."

"Your killer's going to smell a rat," Bellows said.

"Maybe. It's a risk we have to take."

Gentry sighed. "Okay, Mike. You know what you're doing and we don't. If you can prove that Reilly was something more than it seems, we'll take it from there."

"I'll prove it," Shayne said grimly.

XV

ROGER SKELL put on his act. The president let it out in his office; he acted very excited about his work. He told everyone that Mike Shayne was going to guard the data.

"You think it's someone inside, Shayne?" Roger asked.

"It's an inside job. It has to be," Shayne said. "No one else could have worked it."

A day passed with nothing hap-

pening, and Shayne taking up his job of guarding the data. Another day passed. On the third night, Shayne went to the office of Skell Electronics and went through the same routine.

After the office was closed and locked up and everyone had gone home, Shayne went into the laboratory. He put out all the lights and sat in a chair near where the data was kept in its locked file. He seemed to sit unmoving in the darkness, his bulk looming in the chair.

But Mike Shayne wasn't in the chair.

As soon as all was dark and he was sure no one could see him, he slid from the chair to the floor and quickly raised a prepared dummy into the seat. To anyone observing, it would look like Shayne was still in the chair and had never moved.

Then he crawled into the darkest corner of the room behind where the door would be when it was opened. Crouched down in the laboratory, Shayne waited. He was not impatient despite the two fruitless days. He was sure that the killer would come for the data sooner or later.

The city outside had grown quiet, little moving in the early morning hours, when Shayne became aware of soft steps outside the laboratory door. Half dozing, he jerked awake and gripped his automatic. He held his breath,

shifting silently into a position to be ready to move in an instant.

The footsteps stopped. Shayne waited. The door was locked, and the detective listened closely. A key grated and turned in the lock! Shayne grinned in the dark.

The door swung slowly, carefully open.

There was a beat of almost thirty seconds.

Then a shadow appeared inside the laboratory, and strode very quickly to the bulky figure in the chair that looked like Shayne.

Shayne switched on the light.

"Hold it right there," Shayne barked.

The man whirled, saw Shayne's automatic, and dropped the gun in his own hand.

Shayne grinned. "Well, hello Rudi!"

Rudi Grass stood without moving a hair of his handsome head. Dressed once again in the impeccable dinner jacket as if he had just come from Sanchez Batista's roadhouse, the slender hood watched Mike Shayne.

"Cute trick," Rudi said coldly. "What do you want, Shayne?"

Shayne smiled. "I've got what I want, Rudi. You. I've got the killer of Matt Weldon and Willy Reilly. What happened, Rudi? Did poor Willy spot you stealing some of the data?"

Rudi Grass laughed. "You must be smoking opium, peeper. Even the fuzz saw Roger Skell shoot

Reilly. Reilly was trying to rob the joint."

"No, Rudi, the cops saw Roger shoot at Reilly. He never hit Reilly, and, as a matter of fact, it wasn't even Reilly he shot at, was it? It was you dressed like Reilly and masked."

"You're dreaming!"

Shayne cocked a bushy eyebrow. "Am I? Sit down, Rudi. I'm going to tell you a story. Go on, sit!"

Grass glared at Shayne for a moment, then he pushed the dummy of the redhead out of the chair and sat down.

"Make it short, shamus. Long stories bore me," Rudi Grass said.

"I won't bore you. I promise," Shayne said. "It goes like this. You steal secrets. Maybe it's a sideline, or maybe you do it for Batista, but you do it. Now you swiped some of Skell's data, but Willy Reilly got suspicious. I don't think he saw you actually take anything, or he'd have gone to Skell, but he saw you hanging around.

"He got pretty interested, and you knew it. So you went to work to get rid of him so you'd have a clear field for the final data on the diode switch. You'd already sold the early data to Matt Weldon. I figure you must have a bigger deal for the final data, or you wouldn't have killed Matt Weldon. I guess he knew too much about you."

Shayne stopped and watched

Rudi Grass. The handsome hood had taken out a cigarette. Now he lit it with a silver lighter.

Rudi Grass blew smoke, and sneered, "Go on, peeper. I like fairy tales."

"You thought up a cute scheme for getting Reilly. You had Reilly buy the black bag, the gun, and get the new key made. Then you faked the gambling debt. That wasn't hard for you. I guess you put the pressure on Batista's manager to do it. He'll talk when we find him, unless you've killed him, too."

"So I faked it all? Man, I got that Reilly to do a lot for me, didn't I? How could I do that, Shayne?"

Shayne ignored the sneering hood. "After you had fixed it to look like Reilly was planning a robbery, you got him down here to Skell's office by some trick. That was at about seven-thirty the night he was shot.

"You dressed up like him and maybe knocked him out. No, I guess you didn't have to knock him out; you just held him. You knew that Patrolman Cruse passed the plant and office about eight every night. You'd cased the place pretty carefully when you stole that data a year ago, and the preliminary data on the diode switch recently. You decided to use the layout of that alley, and Cruse coming past.

"So you shot poor Willy Reilly



just before eight that night, *using Skell's gun you'd taken from the unlocked drawer where it was always kept.* You reloaded the gun, put it back in the drawer while Skell was in his lab, and then went out into the main office and made noise.

"Skell came out to look, got the gun, and you ran out. You knew he'd chase you. Cruse showed up to be a perfect witness. You ran to that alley. Then you turned and shot at Shell and Cruse. You went into the alley *before they shot back.* In the dark, in a fast melee like that, no one could be quite sure of what had happened. So you shot at them, knowing they would shoot back, and you were inside the alley before they did shoot. All their shots missed, of course.

"Only you had Willy Reilly's

body inside that alley already! You had a full minute to put a gun in his hand and run out the rear of the alley. Cruse came into the alley, and found Reilly shot dead, the gun in his hands, the bag of money beside him. And when the autopsy was done the time of death was about right, close enough, and ballistics proved that Reilly had been shot with Skell's gun!"

Shayne sighed. "What they didn't know, couldn't know, was that *three* bullets had been fired from Skell's gun. You had already used the gun to kill Reilly, and reloaded.

It wasn't a bad scheme at all. It just didn't fit Reilly's character and past history."

Rudi Grass sat and smoked. In the silence the hood seemed to be thinking hard.

His cold eyes never left Shayne's face, but his mouth moved as if talking to himself. At last he gave a shrug.

"Maybe you're right, but how're you ever gonna prove it, Shayne? You haven't got a ghost of a chance of proving that in any court. It's all guessing."

Shayne nodded. "You know, Rudi, you're right. I can't prove a word of it. This time I know I can't. But I won't have to. I've got you for breaking and entering here right now. That'll put you away for a good time. On top of that, maybe we can get you for

killing Matt Weldon. I figure that was a spur-of-the-moment killing, and you probably used your own gun—that gun on the floor there!"

Rudi Grass looked at his pistol and the floor and turned pale.

XVI

RUDI GRASS looked at Mike Shayne. "You're a pretty smart man, Shayne."

"I try to stay a jump ahead of punks like you," Shayne said.

Glass nodded. "Yeah. You got it all figured out, and you set up a neat trap. You figured I'd hear about the new diode ideas, and come to get them."

"That's what I figured."

Rudi Grass grinned a cold, wolfish grin. "Yeah. You figured I'd come—and I figured you'd think that! I figured you'd have a trap set up for me, peeper! You're not smart, you're stupid! I smelled a trap, big man, and I'm ready! Get him, honey!!"

Shayne started to whirl. A sharp voice stopped him. A female voice behind him.

"Don't try, Mr. Shayne. I have a gun and I can shoot."

Shayne stopped. He did not look around. He began to nod to himself as if he should have guessed.

"Gwen Davis," he said, "I should have known it was you. It's all that really makes sense, right? Willy Reilly wondered about

someone who was working late when there was no real reason. That was you. Right, Miss Davis?"

"Yes, Mr. Shayne," the tall secretary said. "Willy became too curious. Unfortunately for him, he was a slow, careful man who wouldn't jump to action, so we had time."

"Too bad" Shayne said, "for all of you. I guess Rudi here is your boy friend, eh, Miss Davis? A pretty stupid choice. He's finished you off by involving you in his murders and schemes."

Rudi Grass stood up quickly. "Shut up, peeper! You ain't got long to live. Gwen, let's get him out of here and take him where we can get rid of him."

"Your Ivy League's grammar is slipping again, Rudi," Shayne said. "And you're not taking me anywhere. I told you I stay a jump ahead of punks like you!"

Gwen Davis said, "What's he talking about, Rudi?"

"Hot air!" Grass cried, bending for his gun. "The bum's just making words."

"No, Rudi," Shayne said. "You figured out that I expected you to make a play for the diode data, right? So you figured it would be a trap. Smart, Rudi, but I'm not a fool. I knew you'd try for the data, and *I knew you'd expect a trap*. So I gave you a trap—only I've got another trap for you, sonny, and right now you're in it!"

Gwen Davis cried, "Rudi!"

"Shut up!" Grass snarled, pale. "The punk's lying!"

"Am I, Rudi?" Shayne said coldly. "No, I knew there had to be two of you, and I knew you'd smell the trap. So I've set up a trap inside the trap, sonny, and you're caught. Will!"

Rudi Grass swept up his pistol. Shayne dove for cover. The windows of the laboratory smashed inward, and faces appeared all around at every window. Someone appeared behind Gwen Davis. The girl cried in terror and dropped her pistol.

"Drop it, Grass!" Will Gentry's voice boomed out.

The handsome gunman stood in the room, pistol in hand, like an animal at bay. His dark eyes darted madly around looking for a way out, looking for someone to shoot to blast his way free. But there was no one to shoot. All the police were well covered at the windows and in the office behind the lab.

"You're a sitting duck, Grass," Will Gentry's hard voice snapped again. "Ten guns are on you. Drop it and raise your hands."

For another moment, Rudi Grass stared all around for a way out. Shayne was behind a lab bench, and Grass couldn't even get at the redhead. Gwen Davis stood alone, shivering.

Rudi Grass collapsed inside. He dropped his gun and stood there with his hands going slowly up.

"Okay, coppers, I guess I'm beat."

Gentry, Bellows and their men swarmed into the room. They quickly handcuffed Rudi Grass. Roger Skell came in and stared at Gwen Davis, who was also handcuffed now, and was crying her pretty eyes out.

Shayne retrieved his automatic and walked to Gentry.

"How much did you hear, Will?"

"All of it. We've got him cold," the bluff Chief said. "That Reilly. At least he wasn't a thief. We'll print the whole story. We owe his wife that much. She was right and we were wrong."

Rudi Grass swore. "You've still got nothing on me! None of you. Okay, breaking and entering, that's all. Batista'll hire ten lawyers to get me off."

"Batista'll drop you cold, Rudi," Shayne said. "He won't like how you tried to use his gambling set-up to frame Reilly, and he won't stand with a killer. Not Sanchez Batista."

"Okay, so he won't! You still don't have anything. You can't prove anything. I killed Weldon, sure, but not with this gun! You'll never prove that on me either!"

"I think we will," Shayne said. "Won't we, Miss Davis?"

Gwen Davis stood there still trembling. She blinked at Shayne, at the cops, and at Rudi Grass.

Mike Shayne said, "The Chief'll



make a deal if you turn witness for the state. You can tell us what happened, and where the gun that killed Weldon is."

Grass cried, "Gwen, don't let them con you! They can't prove a thing. I'll get off!"

"It's double murder, Miss Davis," Will Gentry growled. "We might make it stick. You'll go up for robbery anyway. Tell us all about Rudi Grass and we'll go light on you."

The silence was thick in the office. Then Gwen Davis sighed. The tall beauty touched her fine face.

"I'll tell you," she said.

Rudi Grass went pale and his knees buckled. Will Gentry nodded to his men. They began to half walk, half drag Rudi Grass out.

XVII

IT WAS ALREADY sunny in Miami when Will Gentry sat behind his desk and watched Mike Shayne.

"You took a hell of a chance, Mike," the Chief said.

"I had to," Shayne said. "I had no proof, no real idea who was behind it all. I figured it had to be two because the way Reilly had talked, and the way someone tried to kill me, I smelled an outsider in it."

"But not alone?"

"No. Only someone inside could have handled the rest of it. Gwen Davis had no trouble. She just sent Willy Reilly out to buy that bag for her, to get a new key for her, and to buy a gun for her. She was the one who set it all up when Rudi had the idea. Reilly wouldn't question errands she sent him on."

"She was working late and leaving a door or window open for Rudi," Gentry added. "She spotted the data Rudi stole and sold. He had a real big buyer for the diode data this time. When they realized that Reilly was suspicious, it was the Davis girl who got Skell's pistol for Rudi."

"Yeah, it had to be someone in the office who knew where Roger kept his pistol. With her helping Rudi, he had no trouble making it look like Reilly had been killed by Skell. Ballistics

don't lie, but liars can use ballistics."

Gentry nodded. "The ballistics evidence was what made us sure. It's funny, you get into the habit of thinking that ballistics always tell a true story."

"Especially when you have a cop for a witness. Cruse just told what he thought he saw. You and me would have seen the same thing. Rudi had a hell of a good scheme."

"Except that Mrs. Reilly just didn't believe her husband was a thief," Gentry said.

"Yeah. Rudi didn't figure on a stubborn wife when he set it all up."

"Or a stubborn detective," Gentry grinned. "I'll admit it, Mike. Without you we'd have closed the book on the case. It looked open and shut. All possible as hell."

"But not probable for Willy Reilly," Shayne said. "Rudi was just too greedy."

The redhead left the office then, and went down to his car. He lit a cigarette in the morning sun.

He had a lot of work in his office, but he had one more job to do first.

Michael Shayne had to go and tell Mrs. Reilly how right she had been. It would make her feel better to know that her Willy had not been a thief. A little better, anyway.

Don't Make It a Federal Case

by ED LACY

The F.B.I. was up a tree and the Pentagon brass was flipping. Me, I was only a dumb cop. Dumb enough to want to break that atomic murder all myself.

I HAVE A thing about faces, so when I was walking up the precinct steps at quarter of four and this portly elderly man passed me going out, his face gave me a real start.

Inside, the precinct was busy—busy with men I'd never seen before. The muster room had a newly printed sign: *Keep Out!* and I had a glimpse of desks and a temporary switchboard set up inside. I asked Bill Marks, the desk lieutenant, "What's going on here, a convention? You know, I could have sworn I saw J. Edgar himself, leaving just now."

"You did see him, Al. The house is crawling with FBI and other top Washington security men," Marks said wearily. "Don't you know what's happened?"

I shook my head; I was report-

ing for the four o'clock shift on the detective squad.

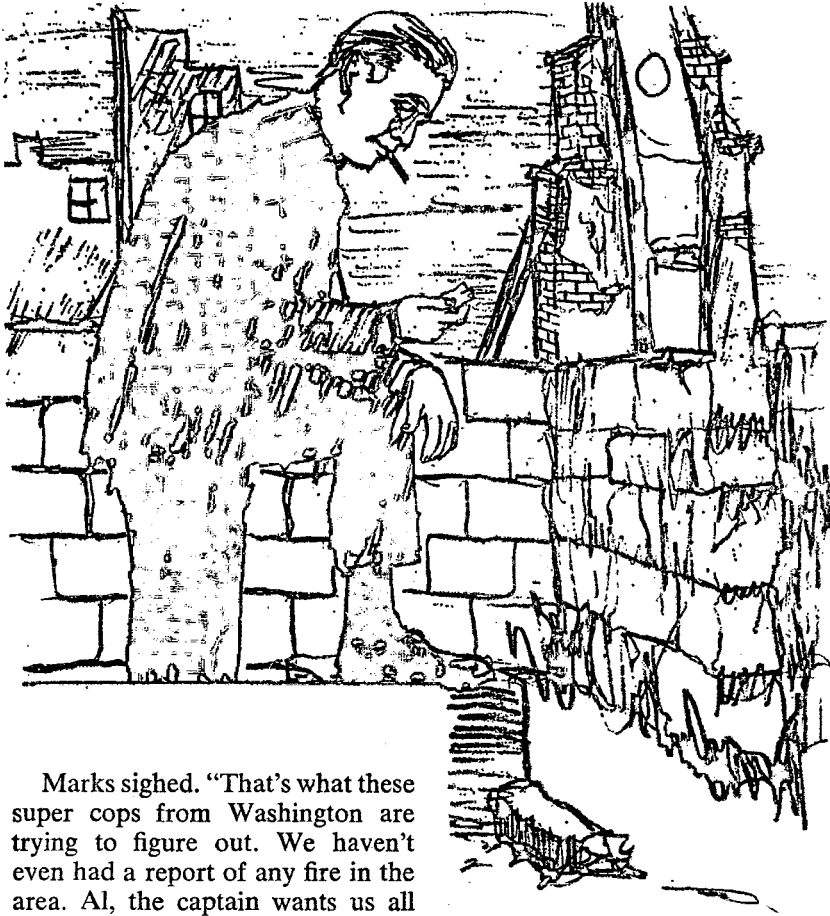
"I had the radio on, didn't hear anything special," I said, thinking that even if it was something like the President making a surprise visit to New York City, our Bronx precinct would hardly be full of Feds.

"Not on the air or in the papers yet, so keep this under your bald head," Lieutenant Marks said. "We picked up a guy this morning, near Walton Road, burnt to death."

"Okay, we got a homicide on our hands. What makes that a Federal case, Bill?"

He leaned down from his desk to whisper, "They say the guy died of atomic burns!"

"Atomic burns? There was an atomic blast some place in the Bronx?" I asked.



Marks sighed. "That's what these super cops from Washington are trying to figure out. We haven't even had a report of any fire in the area. Al, the captain wants us all to stay out of the Feds' hair."

I went up to the detective squad room. Lieutenant Dave Wintino nodded at me. I glanced at the arrest sheet, asked, "Anything cooking beside this mysterious stiff, Dave?"

"A stolen car, a drunken brawl. Odd the day should be so light."

"Dave, was there really an

atomic blast around here? Wouldn't somebody have at least seen or heard the explosion? And how about the radiation, the fallout, or whatever it's called?"

Wintino sighed, too, patting his slick hair. "At eleven this morning

the desk got an anonymous phone call about a dead man in the bushes near Walton Road. The guy was completely burnt to a crisp—no prints, no identification to go on, except he was a male, five foot-nine, about one hundred forty pounds.

"The body was sent to Morris Hospital. It happens they have a new doc there, a Dr. James Lawrence, who used to be with the Atomic Energy Commission. Now he's the hospital X-ray expert. Anyway, he's the one who announced the man had died from atomic burns and within two hours Washington was all over the place. There's no evidence of any explosion or fire in the bushes of Walton Road, so the stiff must have been dumped there."

"If the body was that badly burned, how did the caller know it was a man? Was the caller a woman or a guy?"

"A man."

"How could there possibly be an atomic blast around here?"

Dave Wintino shrugged his chunky shoulders. "That's what has Washington in an uproar. If the deceased was somehow fooling with atomic material, it's possible the entire city, the whole east coast is in danger!"

"I don't know about that. There's too many holes. Isn't it a fat coincidence that the stiff should be brought to a hospital that just happens to have an atomic expert

working for them? I mean, we're making it play like a science-fiction story on the boob tube. Have we questioned people living around Walton Road? Not that there's many houses there. But an atomic blast—I don't buy that."

"Al, this is supposedly too big and too complicated for us ordinary cops. Let Washington handle it. That's our orders. We—" Wintino's phone rang and he listened for a minute, then snapped, "Damn it, why can't they send somebody to the deli? Yes, sir."

Putting the receiver back on the cradle, he glanced at me and said, "Al, do me a favor. The brains left a list at the desk of coffee and sandwiches they want. Listen, you're not playing errand boy. It's just that they're new to the area and busy. Understand?"

"Sure."

I went down and picked up the list and a twenty dollar bill. Lieutenant Marks said, "Don't ask for a car; they're all in use. And the uniformed men, they're either getting ready to go on duty or coming off duty."

"Let's not make a thing over nothing, Bill," I said, walking out. I've been a cop for twenty-eight of my fifty-two years and I didn't feel it was degrading to be sent for coffee. I didn't like it but it wasn't any big deal, one way or the other.

I carried two big boxes of stuff back and Marks called somebody out of the muster room. This slim,



well-dressed guy, looking like a college kid, started to take the boxes and the \$3.30 in change, then asked me, "Oh, where's the bill?"

"What bill?"

"We have to show a record of all expenses. Please go back and get me a bill, with the name of the store and the date."

"Stop it. You can't buy fifteen coffees, a dozen sandwiches, cakes and butts for less than sixteen dollars and seventy cents."

"Pops, you're missing the point," he said coldly. "I must have a bill for our files."

"Junior, make a right at the corner and two blocks over you'll see the deli. Get your own bill." I started for the stairs.

He grabbed my shoulder. "Look, it's a matter of routine. I have to show a paid bill for our—"

I pushed his hand away and kept walking. I reached the squad room as Wintino's phone rang and he listened for a moment, then said, "Why the hell didn't you tell him you needed a receipt? No, we don't work it that way here. We pay for our own coffee. Look, we

have other more important things to do than—What? A fuss over—All right."

Hanging up he grinned at me. "Al, before Washington blows its dome, type out a goddamn slip that you spent—whatever you spent, the date, the precinct address and sign it."

By now I had steam up and after I typed up the slip, I told Dave, "This place is starting to close in on me. Since it is slow and I have some vacation coming, how about giving me forty-eight hours off, starting as of now?"

"Jeez, Al, everybody's on edge, relax."

"Relax my butt. First, this is our area and it should be our case. Okay, it involves top security and all that, but I don't need any young jerk, Fed or not, talking to me like I'm a senile dummy. Secondly, Dave, I damn near belted the jerk."

Wintino patted his fancy hair. "Okay, Al, take the vacation. Precinct is busting with men and so is the area. You're not to talk about this. Hush-hush stuff, until it's released to the papers."

"I know. The walls are full of ears and I'm really double agent 000."

Dave Wintino gave me a tired grin and a poke on my arm.

When I reached our apartment, Flo was watching TV and on seeing me she wailed, "Al, are you hurt?"

"No, hon. Things are slow and I took two days vacation."

"What did you do that for? We were keeping all your time for a trip to see my sister in Dayton?"

"Flo, let me alone."

Over a beer, I watched TV for awhile with Flo. Feeling restless, I went into the kitchen to fool around with a radio set I've been trying to fix for a couple of years now. This relaxed me: if I couldn't repair a simple radio, why stick my empty head into atomic stuff. Along about seven, Flo called, "Al, come look at this!"

They had it on the TV news. First a message from the President, read by the mayor, telling everybody not to panic. Then the police commissioner himself explained about finding the charred body and again told us not to panic. Then the police commissioner himself explained about finding the charred body and again told us not to panic. This was followed by an interview with Dr. James Lawrence, a bearded little guy of about thirty-five or forty.

He said, "As an authority on radiation, there is not the slightest doubt in my mind but that the deceased died as a result of intense radiation burns. I said radiation burns, not atomic radiation burns.

"We quickly cremated the body, to safeguard others from possible radiation. There is no danger to the population. An atomic bomb, for example, is not a device one

can carry around in a suitcase. But the fact remains that this man did die from some form of radiation burns. The authorities are checking out all nearby atomic power plants, ships, and so forth. Again, as a radiation expert, let me stress there is no danger to the city."

The mayor made another speech about having the matter under control and urging folks to be calm, go about their routine business.

I told Flo why I'd taken the two days off and she said I'd done the right thing. We talked about the possibility of an atomic blast, as everybody else in town was certainly doing. I suggested to take in a movie but Flo said she wanted to see a certain TV show. We had supper and when she sat herself in front of the TV, I took a bath, read the sport pages of the evening paper, was in bed before ten.

Awaking about four, I stared at the ceiling, listening to Flo's even breathing, the whine of the wind outside. I was enjoying the snug warmth of our bed in a way only one who has walked a beat in the rain and snow can appreciate.

If they were so jittery about the city panicing, why did they let the news out? Probably because they were trying to learn who was missing, the identity of the deceased. But it was impossible that there had been even a small atomic explosion some place; they supposedly had machines to check on

things like that. And why was the stiff dumped on Walton Road? If the guy had been some sort of spy, wouldn't it have been easier to bury him?

It's been my experience that in cases where nothing makes sense, plain, old, routine police work is the can opener. The Feds were so busy worrying about the atomic angle, maybe they should be handling it as a murder case?

I had to grin in the darkness. Al, the super eye, solving an atomic mystery! Nuts, even when we had a murder they brought in an expert from the homicide bureau. Sure, I was good at handling forced entries, muggings, stolen cars—but atomic bombs were way out of my league. The President and everybody else had said there was nothing to worry about. And I was on vacation, even if it was too damn cold for fishing or doing anything.

So I turned over and went to sleep.

When I opened my eyes it was ten and I felt great. When Flo heard me in the bathroom, she called from the kitchen, "Al, you want eggs or pancakes?"

"How about some of each, honey?"

"This one time, because you are on vacation. Watch that belly you're pushing around. I got the paper."

When I sat down to breakfast, Flo said she wanted to get her

shopping over, in case we went downtown to see a show. I ate and read the paper.

The dead man was all over the front page, but a feature story on Dr. James Lawrence interested me more. He'd been a child math prodigy, one of the youngest members of the Atomic Energy Commission. He had suddenly resigned two months ago and came east to take the \$12,000 a year hospital job, a \$5000 cut in his pay with the atomic commission.

The story said Dr. Lawrence had switched jobs because he was on the verge of a big atomic discovery. Working for the government, he would be unable to patent an anti-radiation pill which would drastically reduce casualties in the event of an atomic attack.

"Several major companies are interested and I expect to shortly patent my discovery and market it," Dr. Lawrence explained. "The pills will sell for under ten dollars and every person will want them. Naturally, I can not reveal the nature of my work at this time, except to state that by administering controlled amounts of a substance which simulates the effects of atomic radiation, the body cells build a resistance to this action and except for intense exposure to atomic rays, anybody using my pills over a period of months should survive an atomic attack."

The news story went on to state that this important discovery

would give the U.S. a tremendous advantage in any actual war. A Nobel prize scientist stated he thought such a pill was improbable but could not state it was impossible, without knowing more of Dr. Lawrence's experiments. He thought such vital experiments should be in the hands of the government. An official of Morris Hospital stated Dr. Lawrence had positively not been using the hospital for his experiments.

I turned to the sports section but gave it up. I still couldn't buy the coincidence of an atomic expert like Dr. Lawrence, being in the hospital when the corpse had been brought in. I almost had the feeling it was all a publicity plant for the doc's pill deal.

I called the squad room, asked Wintino, "Missing Persons report anybody like the burned guy missing?"

"No. Al. I keep telling you the Feds are handling this."

"I know. Where does this Dr. Lawrence live?"

"Grandview Hotel."

"That old dump? A guy making twelve grand a year should be able to afford—"

"Al, stop it. The Grandview is near the hospital."

"Fordham Plaza is just as near and newer."

"Al, what's with you? Are you on vacation or not?"

"Sure, Dave. It's merely that I was thinking this should be han-

dled as a homicide, not as a security. You're right; what am I bugging myself for?"

I dressed and the phone rang. A friend of Flo's, asking what time the bridge game was for. I said Flo would call her back and when Flo came home and said she was calling off their weekly game because I was around, I told her to go ahead and play. We'd take in a movie at night.

Around noon I took a bus to the Grandview Hotel, a rambling sort of place which had been classy maybe fifty years ago. When I showed my shield to the portly desk clerk he said happily, "My, now! Another one! All I've been doing this morning is talking to officers and reporters. The publicity may help the hotel. Now sir, what can I do for you?"

"Im just looking for some background information on Dr. Lawrence; sort of give us a full picture of him. Is he married?"

"No indeed; at least not that I know of. He's a man who keeps to himself a great deal. Very busy, you understand. Matter of fact, I rarely see him, that is, to speak to, I mean. He leaves for the hospital before nine; returns here around five-thirty and then off he goes again, returning late, when the night clerk is on."

"Does he have many visitors?"

"Not a one."

"Any idea where he goes at night?"

The plump face looked astonished. "Now sir, how would I know that? I doubt if it's a social call. At night he isn't especially dressed or anything. Just goes out and hails a taxi."

"How about Saturdays and Sundays?" I asked.

You have to ask a dozen wild-hair questions to luck up on one of any use.

"Over the weekends he leaves at about nine a.m., generally is gone until late at night."

"Sober type?"

The look of plump astonishment again. "Sir, we're talking of a scientist."

"Sure. As I said, I'm merely getting the complete picture. What about his mail? Any specials or telegrams or—"

"Dr Lawrence never gets mail here."

"Thanks." I stopped to buy a paper at the ancient lobby stand and walked out. It was growing cold. There wasn't any regular taxi stand near. I stood around for about a half hour, freezing. Finally a taxi parked near the corner. Flashing my badge, I showed the hackie the news photo of Dr. Lawrence, tearing it out of the paper, asked if he ever took the man anyplace nights around six.

"Naw, officer. I'm around here most of the time, too. I'd remember a guy with a beard."

"Any other cabbies work this corner?"



"Always some passing, but I hang around here. I like to work near home, if possible."

"You ever pick up a slim man, about forty, who leaves the hotel every night at six?"

"Look, I pick up lots of guys, but none with a beard. What's he done?"

"Nothing." I shivered with the cold, rubbed my hands together. I'd forgotten gloves and— "Wait a minute."

I covered the beard on the picture with my handkerchief. "Ever see a guy like this, with a muffler over his chin?"

"I don't know if it's this guy, but I do pick up a nicely dressed little guy with a muffler. Might have a beard, for all I know. Yeah, now that I think of it, I've picked him up a few times around six-thirty."

"Where does he go to?"

"No big deal; always to the same place, a corner on River Avenue."

Offhand I couldn't recall any houses on River Avenue. I got in the cab. "Take me there."

In the windshield mirror I saw the pained look on the cabbie's

face. I added, "Cash on the barrel head."

It was a ninety-five cent ride to River Avenue and I couldn't see anything but a few private, old metal garages up the street. "You sure this is where you take the guy?"

"Yup. Remember, the first time I asked if he had the right place, because at night there's so much nothing around here. But he always got off here and started walking up that way." He jerked a thick thumb toward some empty lots, away from the garages.

"No houses around. Who uses those garages?"

"There's an apartment house on Chester Avenue; that's a couple blocks south. I suppose the garages belong to them. You want to go back?"

I paid him and walked around. The garages looked okay. I started in the direction the cabbie had pointed. Crossing one of the lots, climbing over old car parts and other junk, I reached another street full of more weedy lots. The outskirts of the Bronx is almost like the country. I came upon the ruins of an old building, maybe a factory, but didn't see anything of interest. Crossing another lot, I came back to River Avenue and spent the rest of the cold afternoon criss-crossing the lots and patches of trees, not seeing a damn thing.

I was home by seven and hungry as a horse. Flo was a little

salty; she'd had supper waiting since six. When she asked where I'd been, I told her I'd taken a long walk.

"Dumb way to spend a vacation day. There's a good movie on Fordham Road. You want to go, Al?"

"Sure, hon."

I wasted two bucks on myself, I was so pooped I slept through most of the show.

I was up early the next morning, got the paper and made coffee. Three people in different parts of the city and Yonkers claimed to have seen a flying saucer the night before the burned man was found and wondered if he'd been thrown out the UFO.

It was raining slightly when I reached River Avenue at nine. This time I covered the lots on the other side of the avenue, near the little stream they insisted was a river.

Along about eleven I found it. There was the remains of a house foundation and back of that, in a clump of trees, the burnt remains of what once had been an old, wooden, one car garage. There were recent tire marks outside the garage and judging by the charred wood, the fire had taken place a few days ago. There seemed to be lots of broken glass tubes and wiring, including the wreck of a gasoline generator.

I poked around in the ashes and stuff for a few hours, found half

of a thick candle. Even if the clump of trees blocked the view, the glow of the fire should have been seen. Could be nobody had been passing then. But if the guy had died here, why was his body found miles away?

I walked a couple of miles to a bus and rode it to a luncheonette for soup and a sandwich. I made two calls to Police Headquarters. I told a clerk to find out who owned the burnt garage. Then I called a guy in the police lab I knew slightly.

"Ike, this is merely a hunch," I said, "so forget it after I ask. If a fellow like this Dr. Lawrence was working on the pill thing, could he do it alone?"

"I guess so. All this radiation bit is over my head. Generally, he'd hire a lab technician, probably a chemist, to work with him. Why?"

"An idea I'm fooling with. Thanks, Ike."

I spent a buck calling all car rental offices in Bronx and Manhattan, giving them my shield number to make it official: no Dr. Lawrence had rented a car within the last two weeks.

I called back to find out who owned the property, was told it belonged to a Mrs. Williams, living in Paris.

I'd gone as far as I could alone. The precinct was still crowded with Feds when I got Lieutenant Wintino aside and told him what I'd found, added, "Dave, this isn't

much more than a lead right now, so I don't think we should bring Washington in. I mean, until we're sure. What I want you to do is send men around checking all the garages in our area, see if we can find a car, maybe a truck, that was garaged by Dr. Lawrence two nights ago. Have them show his photo, but with the beard covered up.

"Next, I want the correspondence unit at police headquarters to contact the Paris police, see if they can learn from this Mrs. Williams if she rented the garage to anybody. Also, a call to the Atomic Energy Commission, to the place where Lawrence used to work, find out if he was friendly with any lab technician, a chemist, who left there about the same time the doc did, get the guy's name and any other info."

Wintino nodded slowly. "Okay. I'll have to check with the captain and the detective borough command on the calls, but I don't see any harm in making the inquiries."

I knew the brass would okay it. Any city police department is interested in taking the play away from the Feds. You know, to balance the super police treatment the FBI, for example, gets in the movies and the headlines.

The phone calls went through okay, but due to the difference in time, in both France and the West Coast, we'd have to wait a few hours for any answers. We spent

all night checking the garages. At four we found it, a small trailer with an out of state license. We didn't need the other info then; a few direct calls, long distance and we found the trailer license belonged to a chemist named Frank Klotz, five feet, eight inches, one-hundred and thirty-four pounds, thirty-two years old.

By seven we were talking to his ex-wife in New Mexico. She hadn't seen Frank for six or seven months but knew he was working on some "important experiment. I never asked for alimony when we divorced, but he called me a few weeks ago, from New York City, said he expected to come into a lot of money soon, that he was a partner in this big deal, that if I still wanted to study art in Europe, he'd send me money shortly."

At eight-thirty the local FBI head was told to be at our precinct and Lieutenant Wintino and I drove to the Grandview Hotel and brought Dr. Lawrence in—moving a dead body, unless you're an undertaker, is a criminal offense.

In the squad car we went through the routine of warning Dr. Lawrence he had the right to a lawyer, didn't have to talk to us. Dr. Lawrence didn't seem the least bit nervous, and anxious to talk. Dave Wintino took a long way back to the station house.

Lawrence claimed he and Klotz were using certain highly combustible elements, including

pure oxygen, in their experiments. They had already made the pill but were checking any possible after effects, on rabbits. The doc said he had reached the garage as a flash fire went off, lasting only a few intense minutes. He thought there must have been a short in the complicated wiring. He had taken Klotz's corpse to the park, knowing it would be brought to the hospital where he worked, when found in the morning.

Dave Wintino asked, "Why didn't you bring the corpse directly to the hospital? Or call the police?"

"There had to be a lapse of time," Dr. Lawrence said calmly, "due to the great importance of our work. If other scientists, including those working for the government, sifted the garage ruins immediately, they might possibly learn the formula we were working on. I couldn't just leave poor Frank there and within a day or two, I was going to tell the whole story. By now, traces of certain chemicals we used will have evaporated. Since Frank was dead, it couldn't make any difference to him and we'd both put in too much time and work on the pill to lose it now."

I still had the half-burned candle. If the fire had been that intense the candle would have completely melted. A candle is the usual gimmick in arson. Had they hit on the right formula and the doc murdered his partner? It was

a possible theory, but with the pill they'd make so many millions, there would be money for both. Or had Dr. Lawrence wanted the fame the pill would bring, for himself?

Both Wintino and I tried tripping the doc with indirect questions, but he was a cool cat and sure of himself. Maybe he knew, with a discovery like the pill in his hands, the government would handle him with kid gloves. All we had was the candle, which wasn't stand-up proof.

Dr. Lawrence told his story again in the squad room, packed with police and Fed brass. The press was called in at once, to quiet the rumors of a loose atomic bomb or the man from a flying saucer nonsense.

The only real charge against the doc was moving the corpse and that was forgotten. A number of high Washington officials huddled with Dr. Lawrence. Before he left with them, the press was told he would give his pill to the government, for further experiments, and he would be in charge of the project.

With Dr. Lawrence gone, the reporters turned on us. Dave gave

me full credit for breaking the case. I told him to take the headlines. Hell, I'm a year away from retirement, don't need the glory treatment. But Dave's an honest type, insisted I'd broken the case on my own.

The reporters interviewed and flash-bulbed me dizzy. Later that afternoon, with Flo, I was rushed to a TV studio. The commissioner made me a detective, 1st grade, and the Vice President himself read a message of congratulations from the White House as Flo beamed at me.

I was in a daze. I needed a shave, I was flustered and bushed from being up nearly forty hours. But when the TV fellow asked me the big question, as to how I'd solved things, I came awake long enough to say, "Being an ordinary police officer, I merely used the routine, plodding methods of an ordinary cop. Something the—higher branches of our security forces probably have forgotten about."

I hoped the TV broadcast was in color: there were a lot of very red Fed faces behind me. But I had to get the dig in. I mean, for a coffee boy I'd done pretty good.

MURDER IN THE NIGHT

by DAN ROSS

It's the Newest MR. MEI WONG Story!

It's Next Month!

A new KEVIN KAR spy adventure



THE HIPPIE MURDERS

Down on the beach, the cats were having a love-in.

And somewhere among them a dirty hippie man

had strictly evil designs on somebody's life—mine!

by MAX VAN DERVEER



SHE WAS LIVING—if you can call it living—in a dilapidated, three-decked, brick building in the center of a dog town two blocks off the university campus.

It was afternoon of a fresh, lazy, late June day, a few minutes after two o'clock in the afternoon, hot and breezy, when I got out of the cab in front of the sagging building.

The cabbie kept his yap shut. There was a question all over his ugly map—he wanted to know

why in hell a dapper fare was bailing out of his heap in Hip Town—but he accepted the bill I shoved at him, made change in a hurry, and drove off without a peep.

He was wise.

Or maybe he smelled the gun in the holster under my gaily checked sports jacket.

The street had an odor. The residents here didn't tub. Obviously. All you had to do was whiff the breeze. Give June and the sun

and the breezes credit. All tried. But all failed.

It was a stinking neighborhood, wallowing in the perfume of dirty sweat socks, and I attempted to close my mind to the odor as I surveyed the brick structure. On the ground floor were what purported to be a drug store and a wine store, sandwiched as if sleeping together, some of their wares jammed on narrow shelves behind display windows that seemed to be vying for honors in a fly-speck contest.

Above the stores were more windows. Two rows. Narrow. And you couldn't let them out of the contest. They had their specks too. Millions of them.

I brought my eyes back down to street level and concentrated on a black slot to the left of the drug store. The slot looked as if it might contain a stairway. At the moment it also contained a body. One of the go-to-hell residents of this campus suburb. He sat sprawled diagonally across the slot opening, most of him a vague shadow. Only his naked feet stuck out into the sunshine.

But if filthy, bare feet is the neon sign for today's hippie, this dude was getting along fine. His footsies were so cruddy they had to be the result of a diligent project. No one could possibly acquire such dirty feet haphazardly.

After all, it does rain, and people walk through puddles, but not

this cat. He'd even managed to stay in out of the rain and the puddles.

When I summoned enough guts to walk across the sidewalk to him, I also discovered that he was long and bearded, had copper-colored hair down to his shoulders, and that his skin was as waxy as a candle.

He did not move. He breathed. Little more. He had a lizard's face—narrow, with droopy, half-moon eyelids and a nervous tongue that darted. He wore faded blue denims with ragged holes in the knees, a lavender ascot and a peach-colored jacket with leather patches on the elbows. The jacket was buttoned to the ascot.

I stepped over him, prepared for anything. Even if he had drawn an extra deep breath in that instant he would have been maimed. That's how careful I was being. But he did not wiggle and I went on up the two flights of concaved steps to the creaky third floor hall, wrinkling my nose against the smell of grease and garbage. I looked for a door with a number 7 hanging on it, found the door about halfway along the hallway, and saw the tiny brass 7 hanging askew.

I used knuckles on the wood and watched the 7 dance a jig.

The girl who opened the door had to be French. We ogled one another. It was good ogling.

She saw a tall Texas Panhandle

guy standing on her threshold, a deceptively innocent-looking gook who has health, no wealth, a square jaw, a black crewcut, dominant Kiowa coloring and features, and is a celibate.

He's also a guy who is skilled in the use of a tear gas ring, a cigarette package transmitter and receiver, a lapel Kiwanis button with its content of lethal poison, a conventional gun, and a special gun that will roast almost anything in a mushroom of fire.

He has also managed to remain alive in spite of the myriad of mayhem and violence heaped upon him in his thirty-three years by sundry foreign agents, counter-agents, double agents, triple agents, and just plain screwballs who have notions about ruling the world. The guy is an agent for Washington's most secreted Bureau.

The girl? Ah, she was very small and very chic and a perfect brown color all over. Except for the eyebrows and the kissable lips. The eyebrows and the kissable lips had been painted a white color, and there were artificial white flecks in the shock of long black straight hair that hung to below her shoulders.

She also was wearing a white, hide-nothing bikini, and there was a ragged yellow quilt draped over an arm. If she was the right girl, Holly, our chief in Washington, had brought in an emotional



blockbuster this time and I was to be in his debt for calling me off the Texas sabbatical and putting me on this chick's doorstep. She suddenly had made the jet journey worth while.

"Claudine?" I inquired hopefully.

Black eyes continued to inventory. She said nothing.

"Claudine Stirlingshire?"

That turned her on. Her face didn't change, but a white eyebrow that had been arched fell back into place and the dark eyes changed. I thought I saw an ounce of relief appear in them. Stirlingshire. It was the name I had been given in Washington.

It wasn't her real name, of course, but now I knew who she was and, more important, she knew who I was.

"You're French," I grinned.

She remained sober, looked disturbed. When she spoke her voice was just above a whisper, slick as melted butter.

"They shouldn't have sent you dressed as you are. In this neighborhood, you stick out like someone who bathes."

"I shower daily, honey. Sometimes twice. Honest."

She wagged her head, looked up and down the empty hallway. "The point is—"

"My appearance and attire came under considerable discussion, doll," I broke in. "It was decided that I drop in natural. You're a runaway from home, right?" It was the ruse she had been living under the last few months. "So I'm the brother who finally has found his wayward sister after many weeks of diligent search. I have come to take you home. Except that you will not be persuaded. That will let me hang around a few days."

"You could've floated in a Hip too. New ones show daily around here."

"Except I don't savvy their lingo, sister dear. *Are* you French?"

For just an instant, I saw a touch of amusement in her dark eyes. "Of the extraction." And then she was sober again. "If it makes a difference. And I can't see that it should. I don't believe I caught your name."

"Kevin Kar."

"Kar? And you are my brother?"

"You were married once. It was an atrocious mismatch, never should have happened, but you've kept his name. Stirlingshire. It has a horribly English sound which appeals to you."

"Shall we go up on the roof?"

"Is there a bar up there?"

"I don't drink. We sun bathe, naturally. I sun bathe every afternoon on the roof. You don't think the abrupt appearance of an unwanted brother should alter that routine, do you?"

As she stepped into the hallway, the hippie from the door slot downstairs came out of the stairwell and padded toward us. Claudine turned away from him.

I went with her. After all, she was much better looking.

She opened a door at the end of the hall and started up another set of dim steps. I took an instant to shoot a glance over my shoulder. The hippie was at the door opposite Claudine's. He was staring after us.

On the roof, the sun was bright, the breeze fresh and Claudine a soothing salve for Texas sunburned eyeballs as she gingerly used bare toes to move chunks of broken brick out of the way and then spread the ragged quilt.

"Strip," she said.

"Darling, I didn't know you really cared!"

She looked peevish. "Look, Mr.

Kevin Kar, this isn't a private patio. Others sometimes come up out of the bowels of the building we're standing on. Let's make this appear as natural as we can, okay? For my benefit?"

So I peeled out of the checkered sports coat, the gun rig, my shirt and tie and heaped them on a corner of the quilt, the gun out of sight. I somehow felt quite naked without the gun. And something had again surprised Claudine. It could have been the gun, or it could have been my build. Whatever it was, she finally decided against comment.

She stretched out on her back on the quilt and put a forearm across her eyes. My pressure points began to tingle at the sight of her and it was only because of a tremendous inner call to duty—a surge of loyalty to Holly and nation—that I finally wrenched my eyes from her to take in our surroundings.

"Who was the cat in the hallway?" I asked.

"He moved in across from me yesterday," Claudine answered. "He could be anyone."

The roof was littered with broken chunks of brick and other debris. Twenty feet off to our right a chimney stuck up into the sky and most of the brick chunks seemed to have come from it. There were holes in the chimney.

"You smell trouble, huh?" I asked.

"I smell trouble," she admitted. "It's why I contacted Holly. I suspicion I have been found out. Apparently I'm not quite as hip as I thought I was."

"You look pretty hip to me. That white on the eyebrows and mouth is wild."

I wandered over to the parapet of the building. It was about a foot and a half high. Off to my left, iron hand railings of a fire escape looped up and over the parapet. In the distance, maybe three blocks away, was the ocean, misty and gray far out at sea.

I returned to Claudine. She had twisted her head, was looking out at me from under the protective forearm. I sat Indian-fashion at her hip.

"You're supposed to unload," I said. "Tell me everything you know or suspicion."

"And then?"

I shrugged. "I report to Holly. A decision will be made."

"I may be going back to Europe soon?"

"You may be."

"I assume you know what we're after here."

"I've been briefed, yes."

She nodded. "Well, it's all here, Mr. Kar. I've learned that much. And it's big. I think much larger in scope than even Washington suspicions. It's cleverly organized with student leaders on the university campus who really aren't leaders at all, just puppets for the

Red overlords. If any one student gets too ambitious, too inquisitive, he or she suddenly disappears from the campus. There have been a couple, I understand, who never turned up again."

"Major league stuff, huh?" I said.

"As big league, Mr. Kar, as you can get."

"Have you got these overlords spotted?"

"In a sense, yes. In another sense, no. There's a chief. I've seen him at the 'in' things. He is a very large man, about six-six, easily two hundred and seventy pounds, erect in carriage, swift in movement, and an expert in disguise.

"He and two cronies, who obviously are bodyguards, wander among the flock at the gatherings. I've never seen any of them in anything but brilliant red robes and gold sandals. The robes are hooded, but their faces are exposed. The big man has a bulbous nose, thick lips, a deep line curving across each cheek down to the corners of his mouth and a stubble of chin beard. The nose, lips, line and beard have come out of a disguise kit.

"And they're a cagy threesome, too. I've tried to get next to them, but they do not allow themselves to associate other than the wandering. Once, about a week ago, I attempted to follow them, but they lost me quickly. It was where

I fouled up, I'm sure. They spotted me."

"You figure you've been under surveillance since?"

"It's a feeling mostly. I haven't noticed anyone in particular, but I think I am being watched, yes."

"The guy across the hall?"

"He could have moved in to keep an eye on me."

"You told Holly there might be a religious angle."

She stirred. "Yes. I'm sure there is. I don't know how it figures into the entire picture, but—"

"Love-child?"

The voice was deep, graveled. It did not caress. It came from behind us. It made me wish I had my gun in hand. I spun on my buttocks as Claudine rolled up on a hip. The guy was draped inside the looped hand railings of the fire escape, arched slightly, his posterior sticking out into space as he smirked on us.

He looked loose, at ease, confident, and dangerous with his elbows propped on the parapet.

It was the hip from downstairs. There was a huge, ugly gun in his right hand, and the gun was pointed at us.

Claudine yelped and peeled off toward the chimney, leaping to her bare feet and bolting. I rolled in the opposite direction, plunging my hand into the heap of clothing I'd piled. The hip fired the gun. It was a booming sound and Claudine screamed and seemed to

lift up on her bare toes as the slug smacked into her.

It wasn't the sound of the shot as much as it was where the slug hit her that mesmerized me. I almost didn't believe my eyes as the bikini bra strap across her back snapped apart and she slammed into the chimney.

She didn't seem to want to go down. She remained plastered against the chimney, groveling, whimpering and clawing.

The second slug from the hip's rod smacked into the roof just in front of my beak. Its whine was a shriek in my ear as it ricocheted over my shoulder. I rolled again—without my gun.

His third shot caught Claudine after she had turned. Her spine was glued to the chimney, her arms wide, her fingers spread, her white lips rounded, forming an O, her eyes rolled back into her head, the bikini top dangling, no longer a support. She was slowly sliding down the chimney when the hole opened in her stomach and the blood spurted like a geyser. She sat spread-legged on the roof.

"The Lord gives—" she rattled.

And then a slug ripped open the area between her eyes and she suddenly didn't have a face.

I pitched the chunk of brick without thinking. I went up on my knees and fired with all of my strength. The chunk struck the hippie's chest as he was bringing his gun around to me.



There was enough force in the throw to pitch him back off balance. He growled and grabbed the looped railing with one paw. The second chunk of brick sailed over his head, but it made him duck down out of sight behind the parapet and gave me the opportunity to close the distance between us.

I lifted a foot, slammed a heel against the fingers clutching the railing and ground. The hippie howled this time, fired a wild shot into space, and then pitched out away from the building. He fell flat and spread, without tumbling. I saw him splatter against the alley and I even heard the plopping sound as the back of his skull split open.

I went down on my knees beside Claudine, but I couldn't help

her. The only guy who could help her now was the guy who would bury her.

I swept up my clothing and gun and raced from the roof. I didn't want cops. Holly wouldn't want me to have cops. Cops wouldn't believe. Cops only would hamper.

I was reasonably dressed again by the time I hit the street door. The building had remained quiet, but outside there was stirring, a general curious movement toward an alley entrance.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk. No one seemed to pay any particular attention to me so I moved with the curious down to the alley, eased inside. The alley was crowded with tiny clusters of hippies now. There were a few murmurs but no discernible words.

The fall had killed the goon. He lay spread on his back, the gun still clutched in his right hand. His skull was cracked open. But more interesting, the lavender ascot was askew now and the coat open. Underneath, the guy was bare, and tattooed in a small arc across his chest was: *The Lord Gives—*

I vamoosed, walked a few blocks, yelled down a cab and rode out to the beach motel, my mind cluttered with the memory of a chic French doll who no longer was so chic. But now was sprawled in death on a rooftop, and with an equally unpalatable memory of a dead hippie.

The doll and the hippie should have been as incongruous to each other as scented bath bubbles and garbage and yet, in another sense, there had been nothing incongruous about them. They had been the hunter and the hunted, and the hunted had turned to kill his stalker.

AT THE MOTEL, I wanted Kate. The motel stretches out long between a highway and a beach. It is clean, comfortable and solid without being pretentious, and Kate, a widow of ten years at thirty-five, operates the business with the quiet efficiency of the expert she is.

I wanted her so I could unload my thoughts, but I knew I would not get her. That is what makes her so valuable to Holly and the Bureau.

Once, without Holly's knowledge, she had been married to one of his agents. It was not until after the agent had been killed in Berlin that Kate became known. She had written Holly. He had made a trip down here to see her.

And ever since the motel has been a haven for the Bureau, sometimes a hideout, sometimes a place of rendezvous, other times just a place to relax. Kate knows, but Kate keeps clear and clean. She is not an agent; and she does not mingle with them.

I saw her leave the office of the motel as I vacated the cab in front

of the unit I'd rented. She walked off in the opposite direction, a big brownette woman with the body of a showgirl and the long legs and slender ankles of a dancer. The sight of her brought alive another want, but I entered the unit alone, stripped to the waist, examined the dirt and abrasions my roll across a roof had left, and slid out of my trousers. The hot, stinging water of a shower was next.

Kate should have been there. Kate could have massaged the taut muscles of my back, helped me relax, but Kate remained her distance. Later, stretched out on the bed, smoking one of my infrequent cigarettes, I allowed my mind to wander back over what I knew and attempted to organize my next move.

Claudine had been brought in from Europe as a hippie plant. She had been established during the school year as a student at the university, where she had been a listening post for the Bureau.

Washington was worried these days. An armed insurrection against the United States government was in the making. The actual insurrection was still in the future—tentatively scheduled for the summer of 1969, Washington had heard—but the inroads were being laid and the Reds had made tremendous headway, especially in and around the colleges and universities across the nation.

There the Commies had found

a vast number of seething, restless, immature youths caught up in the recklessness of free speech movements, inhibiteness and rebellion.

The kids were easily brainwashed. They had neither the emotional stability nor the reasoning power to cope with the pitfalls of Red philosophy and doctrine. And the Commies were swiftly building an organization not at all dissimilar to the Cosa Nostra with its families. Among the hips, these families were called tribal groups; they were being located in key areas on and around the campuses.

One such group, reputedly vast in numbers and especially skilled in the theft of money, guns and ammunition for its secreted arsenal, had sprung up and spread like an unrestricted plague at the university where Claudine had been installed. Her objectives had included learning just how large this particular tribe was, ferret out its leader, and discover the arsenal.

But now Claudine was dead.

My room phone jangled. I swept it up, fully expecting to hear Kate's voice on the line. Instead I had the high, mincing, feminine voice of a male with a slight lisp.

"The cat on the hot tin roof." Laughter was a cackle. "Only it wasn't a tin roof, was it, Dad? You want to hear more, Square, you hit the sand at Pinto Beach, nine

in the P.M., this night, hear? You've got yourself a disillusioned doggie, Pop, a freaked out fearcat. What I'm saying is, I'm defecting, man. I'm up to my shaggy eyebrows with the Might Over Right ooze. You hit the sand and you'll get your message, for sure. Then I'm going home to Mother!"

The lisp I bought for real. The defection I did not. On the other hand, I no longer was at a dead end. I suddenly had a live customer, someone who had trailed me to the motel from the scene of double death. It was the only way my lisper could have known where to find me.

I called Kate at the office. Her smooth voice was salve to an eardrum that just moments before had been subjected to shrillness.

"Have you been on the switchboard?" I asked.

"Your caller," she said, "did not ask for you by name. He—or wasn't it a she?—asked to speak to the man in Unit Fourteen."

"You're a doll, doll."

"And Pinto Beach, friend, is less than a mile down the pike to the north. You can walk."

"Isn't there a law against monitoring telephone calls? Invasion of privacy, something like that?"

"You answer me one, lover. Just what in hell is a freaked out fearcat?" Kate asked.

"Ahh, I can see you're not a hep hip, mouse."

"All right, Kev, I surrender. But be careful at nine in the P.M. this night, eh? You haven't paid your tab."

"I'm going loaded for bear, honey."

"He—or was it a she?—sounded more like a slinky, sneaky, dirty, I'm-gonna-shoot-your-guts-out pussycat, darling. Take care, yes?"

"Ahh, you care."

"Well, certainly! I love you. Didn't you know?"

"Show me—say, later this night."

"If you're still alive I just might break a rule and do that." Kate grinned.

"That kind of promise will keep me alive! The fruits of battle and all that."

"No promise, darling. Just a pleasant, tingly taunting thought of the moment. By nightfall, I'll be my old self again. I'll remember the reputation I'm supposed to maintain."

Kate was gone from the line and I sat there, looking at the mouthpiece of the telephone and grinning like an oaf. After all, some promises are kept, you know.

IT WAS WARM. There was no moon but it was light. And Pinto Beach had attracted its quota of lovers. The couples lay like entwined fishworms in the bottom of a rusted coffee can. The only



sound was the lapping of ocean water at the beach.

It was nine o'clock as I weaved a path through the bodies, waiting for one of the shadowed humps to separate, become two persons. I felt like a lisping voice should call out to me. I also felt prepared for anything. My gun was ready, and I had decked out in a few other trinkets that were equally capable of spreading death and destruction.

Behind me, a motor scooter swung from the highway down onto the beach and stopped. I stood twisted briefly, staring on the light of the scooter's single lamp, then I moved on.

I heard the scooter motor rev up and I looked again. The scooter was weaving between the bodies, moving slowly, as if searching, through the sand toward me. I stepped aside, giving the scooter plenty of room. A guy was driving; a girl was clamped against his back. The scooter went on down the beach. Lovers looking for space, I decided.

I grunted. Where was my lisper?

I watched the scooter make a U turn and weave back. Suddenly there was activity on the beach. I frowned. Couples untangled and seemed to melt off into the night, giving me plenty of breathing room.

But I didn't understand until it was too late.

Abruptly, the scooter zoomed toward me, its headlamp spotlighting me—and it came to me in that instant. I remembered something out of Saigon. I went for my gun. Too late. I felt the searing of pain across the side of my skull before I heard the snap of a gun in someone else's hand. I had one instant of clear understanding, and then I had nothing.

When I came awake I was stretched out on something hard and I was trussed. I attempted to lift my head. Dizziness swept me. I felt as if I was a whirlbath. I settled, kept my eyes closed. I didn't know where I was but I would have bet on what had happened to me.

The Reds had made the boy-girl teams popular lately. In Saigon, for instance, the teams hunted GIs in the darkness before curfew.

They rode motor scooters, the guy driving, the girl on the back. The girl often did the shooting as the scooter whizzed past the unsuspecting GIs. In Saigon, they

were known as assassination teams.

I hadn't been assassinated, but I had been smacked down with a slug that had creased my skull. From there on, it was a guess. I surmised I had somehow been draped across a scooter and hauled away from Pinto Beach to whatever now was ahead.

And from my point of view, the future did not look bright.

My point of view, in reality, was from a hardwood floor. I had my head up again and my eyes open. There was no dizziness now, just gloom and the sensation that someone was holding a branding iron against the side of my head. My ankles were taped together tight, my wrists were bound in front of me and there seemed to be a wide strip of tape across my mouth.

The room was huge and eerily shadowed. Candles inside glass coverings provided the only light. Three walls had been painted black. The fourth wall was a vast mural of a naked boy and girl in an intimate embrace.

The boy had been painted brilliant red, the girl a soft yellow. They were in a green meadow with a bright orange sun and white fleecy clouds splashed against a blue sky above. On the floor across the base of the mural was a row of the glass-encased candles, the flickering light casting moving shadows on the boy and girl.

And in a corner of the mural, where a signature normally might be, were the words: *The Lord Gives . . .*

I rested briefly, then looked around again. At an angle off to my right a young couple was squatted opposite each other and hovering over another glassed candle. The guy had a thick mop of hair hanging down to his eyes, but no beard. He either believed in shaving or wasn't old enough to sprout hair from his chinny-chin-chin; I couldn't tell.

He wore what probably had been Bermuda shorts once, was barefooted and bare chested, but there was a jacket dangling from his shoulders and a bead necklace hanging from his neck. The jacket was open and pushed back from his hips as he squatted, and I also could see the old Wild West belt and holster with the ancient Colt .45 slung against his hip.

I wondered if he lisped.

The girl looked like she had been put together from a collection of leftovers. Her baby face was a pale white color and almost hidden in long, black hair. But peeking out of that hair were large, round, glowing, black eyes that belong to a vampire of another century.

She was unpainted and barefooted, wearing a miniskirt that was split to well up on a bony hip as she squatted. Across her shoulders was a dark cape that was

fastened with a huge silver pin just above her breasts. From the pin, the cape parted to form an inverted V of chalk-white skin down to the skirt top.

She along with the dude, looked dead.

I wanted to yell at them, determine if they were alive. But they upstaged me. They moved. The girl held out a silver chalice in both hands and the boy produced a bottle of wine from a shadow and poured into the chalice.

They sipped, first the boy, then the girl, and then the boy left the chalice with the girl, stood and came to me. He braced himself at my feet and stared down. He looked twenty. Lisp, creep, I thought. He remained silent. Suddenly he turned and marched to one of the black walls.

Surprisingly, a door opening appeared in that wall and he was gone. A few seconds later there was the sound of a motor scooter being started and revved and then the scooter was out of hearing range.

The girl, leading with her pelvis as she approached, stood at my toes now, the cape closed. Her face was expressionless, but the black eyes were luminous and contained what I considered an unhealthy curiosity as she held the chalice in the fingers of her left hand. She sipped once, continued to stare down on me and

I began to get the creepy impression that I was being mentally sampled.

Then she squatted at my hip.

"Hi," she said, and her voice was a surprise. It was a deep voice, soft, sleepy, and matured far beyond her birth years.

"Comfy?" she asked. Her smile was crooked. She reached out and yanked the strip of tape from my mouth.

"Here."

She used a forefinger to tip up my chin. She placed the lip of the chalice against my numbed lips and poured. Wine dribbled down the corners of my mouth, but some of it found my throat.

Port. Ungh.

The girl laughed gently on the dribbles, examined the sear on the side of my head.

"Not bad," she said. "A bit bloody, but not bad. That was a pretty good shot, wasn't it? Right on target. But then I'm an expert. I'm really not an incubator baby, as you might be thinking. I had a father once. A mother, too. But I didn't like my mother; she was a dull spade. My old man, though, was something else. He taught me how to shoot. He was an expert, too. That was in London. Where he made up his safaris. Those were good days, I guess. Those London days. They—"

"You've never seen London, kid."

"That right?" She seemed to

contemplate, then she shrugged. "Okay, so my old man operated a shootin' gallery on Coney Island."

"Nor Coney Island."

She cocked an eyebrow.

"You're a wise one, ain'tcha?"

She sipped wine. "But I'm still an expert shot. You gotta admit that. Ridin' the back of a scooter, poppin' at you out of the dark, knockin' you down, just like the man told me to do. I didn't kill you. The man said, 'Don't kill him. Nick him. Bring him to us.' So I'm good, huh?"

"Who's the man?"

She smiled. "You're gonna see him soon enough."

"That where your friend went? To get the man?"

"Demetrius is on the horn, yeah. He's gotta get the word. You know. What's next with you. The man will tell him." She chuckled. "That is, he'll get the word if he took a dime with him. That's what it costs to use the horn, you know. A dime to talk to someone along a wire. Capitalism. Bah! I sure hope Demetrius has a dime."

"Are you drunk, kid?"

"Quit callin' me kid. I'm not a child. I'm a mature love-woman."

"Maybe you're ridin' the LSD Express, huh?"

She shook her head dramatically. "Not that funky acid, Dad. Hey, know somethun? You're cute. Old, but cute. I kinda wish you were gonna be 'round. At least through tomorrow. There's a

thing at two o'clock in the P.M. tomorrow. At the sandpile. Baker Beach. A love-in. You know. We loll 'round, blow out the webs. It'd be a healthy thing for you, I think. You look like you got a lot of webs."

"Have you got a name?" I asked.

"Sure, I got a name. It's Zoe."

"That all? Just Zoe?"

"Yeah," she said. "Zoe. Just Zoe." Then she repeated. "Cute, Very, very cute. You give a girl safari heat. Know what I mean? Maybe you don't. That's when a love-woman is out in this green jungle, see, and she gets all itchy for the head hunter. Anyway, it's the hell with the hubby, the hell with the lover you've brought along. You go for the physical specimen. That's safari heat. And I think I'm gettin' it. Because you're cute."

"Forget it."

"Why? She actually looked disappointed. Then she brightened.

"Hey, see my snakes?" She fingered the silver pin on her cape, tilted it so I had an unrestricted view of the two entwined snakes. "Those are love-snakes," she said. "It's sorta a message to the world, I guess. Head hunters aren't the only ones who make love. Everybody makes love. Even snakes."

"Not me."

"Not with Zoe, you mean, huh?" Lids narrowed over the

bright eyes. She sipped from the chalice. She looked hungry. Too hungry. "Not with a teenybopper, huh?"

"Are you with a tribe, doll?" I asked, attempting to distract her.

"Sure, I'm with a tribe," she said. "What do you think?" She leaned forward suddenly and kissed my cheek. Quickly she caught my jaw in her free hand, twisted my head, put her young mouth against mine, tasted, inventoried, and finally drew back.

"Not bad," she said. Then: "We're the Third People, man. Haven't you heard? You should get with the psychedelic revolution, sort out your mind. Even if you are old. You might even make the tribe someday."

"The Third People?" I queried, attempting to sound as if I was totally unaffected by her child's explorations. "That's the university tribe?"

"It's the only tribe in this part of the world, Dad. The university is our turf."

"And Demetrius is some kind of chieftain in the tribe?"

"Demetrius? A chieftain?" Crowsfeet appeared between her black eyes.

"Well, he seems to know the man," I said defensively.

"Demetrius has a telephone number," she said, clipping the words. "That's all. He doesn't know anybody. And how come you're askin' so many questions?"



"We were makin' love, remember?"

"I wasn't, honest," I said honestly.

"You afraid of me?"

"No."

"Then let's make love," she said, putting the chalice aside and settling against me.

She wrapped her arms around my neck. Tight. She curled against me. She put her lips against mine.

A LONG TIME later, Zoe pulled back her head, closed her eyes, sighed.

"See?" she whispered. "It isn't so bad. And you know what you're doin'. I can tell." Her smile was almost a smirk.

Okay, so maybe I did react a bit, even if she was a teenybopper.

But I managed. "Er—how long will Demetrius be gone?"

"He'll be back soon enough," she shrugged. "Too soon." She squeezed herself against me, snuggled, kissed my throat. "So let's forget about him for the present, huh? Let's—"

"How can I?"

It seemed to surprise her. Her black eyes opened wide. She didn't blink. "Do you mean you are afraid of Demetrius?"

"Trussed hand and foot, shouldn't I be?"

She shook her head. "Demetrius isn't going to hurt you."

"Only deliver me to the lion's den, huh?"

"Well . . ."

She had to speculate on that one. It took her a little while, and then she snuggled back against me, opened my tie and shirt collar and went to work on my throat again. "Demetrius," she breathed, "is Greek. And Zoe is Greek. Zoe means life." Her lips moved up to my earlobe. Her teeth nibbled.

"I am Zoe. Actually, I am Maisie Jo Osage and I am from a place—you're never gonna believe this—called Osage, Iowa. That's in the Midwest. But with Demetrius, with you, I am Zoe. I am life. I am—"

"Honey, if you've got so much life in you, how 'bout freein' me, so I can have mine?"

It got to her. "Are you kiddin'?" She shook her head, went up on her knees at my side. "Do you want me to die, too?" She rearranged her cape to cover things, reached across me and got her chalice, sipped.

"Look, Demetrius and Alexander Hypselantes were brothers. Big Greek revolutionists. And you

killed Alex. You pushed him from a rooftop."

"Alex had grimy feet," I said. "Besides, I'm not buyin' that brother jazz."

"Within The Third People they were brothers," she said stonily, her eyes flashing. "And you did kill Alex. We saw you from the street. We saw—"

"Then you also know why Alex climbed a fire escape," I accused.

"Your friend was a hoax on the scene, Dad. Trouble, said the man. It was at the solstice happening, the June twenty-two thing, and the man says there is a sham in the midst, one who does not love, rather, she hates, a wench named Claudiner, a fraud who will do The Third People evil, and the fraud must be annihilated. The—"

"So Alex got a message."

Zoe drank. "You never should have made the scene, Dad."

"Are you going to watch me die, doll? Is that a part of the—"

"Shut up!" She stood. She bobbed. She tipped the chalice high, wiggled it, looked into it. "Goddamn you," she mumbled. She suddenly seemed very drunk.

"Can I have some more wine?"

She swiped at the dangling hair, stared down on me. Then she wheeled and weaved across the room to a table. She played the reed organ wildly, banged the tambourine, left the instrument, savagely kicked a double mattress on the floor, found the wine bot-

tle, poured healthily, and returned to stand at my toes. Her mouth was a set, thin line now, her eyes bright and brittle.

"Get down on your knees," I nodded. "Feed me."

She went down, bobbed.

"Drink." I breathed. "You, then me."

She lifted the chalice, tipped back her head. Her jaw line was exposed. Something in her throat throbbed. I brought my feet up fast and hard. The toes of my shoes caught the exposed jaw and pitched her back. The chalice flew and clattered across the hardwood floor but that was the only sound. Zoe, the love-baby, was out of the picture.

I wiggled over to one of the candles, tipped it, managed to work the candle free of the glass, then sat and used the flame to burn tape—and my wrists. I had been stripped of my weapons. When I was free, I looked for them, found none.

Zoe—or Maisie Jo Osage from Osage, Iowa, if you prefer—was a lightweight. I draped her over my shoulder and stepped outside. I was in a dimly-lighted alley. The light came from a nearby weak street lamp. I froze. Opposite me were four bare legs, two each dangling from twin garbage cans. I couldn't see the bodies in the blackness; I wasn't even sure there were bodies attached to the legs.

Then one leg on one garbage can moved, nudged another leg on another garbage can and a squeaky feminine voice came out of the darkness: "Look, Oswald! Neanderthal man! Ain't he the most?"

"You're the mostest of the most, Hertha," replied an equally squeaky voice. "Come. Let's oscillate."

The legs became entwined. The garbage can lids rattled. And I vamoosed.

Striding down a city street with a love-child draped across one shoulder, even at eleven o'clock at night, is not considered conventional. You get stares—and you can get cops. I told the stares: "She's ill," and hurried on. There were no cops. And I finally got a cab.

"She's ill," I told the driver. I gave him Kate's motel for a destination.

Kate broke a rule when I pounded on the door of her apartment unit next door to the office. She went a little bug-eyed at the sight of Zoe's posterior hanging a couple of feet from her nose, but, accustomed to almost any happening, she swung the door wide and ushered me inside.

"You're picking 'em young these days, Kevin-doll," she said. "Even the backend looks tender." She paused, then exploded. "But where in God's name did you get this one—and what is it?"

"It's a love-child," I told her truthfully. I put Zoe on a couch, yanked her cape together. "She's heady with wine. Plus she suffered a small tap under the chin."

Kate was suspicious. "You look a little used yourself."

"I have been," I admitted. "You got a gun in this joint?"

"How were you used?"

I gave her a scowl to show her how angry I could become with nosy dames—in case she'd missed it before.

"Okay, okay," she said quickly. "I've got a gun." She scooted from the front room of the apartment, entered a bedroom, and returned in less than a minute with a popgun, a .38.

"Where's yours?" she wanted to know.

I explained briefly.

"And now?" she said.

"Put on a pot of coffee. We're about to stage an awakening of our own."

From the kitchenette, she asked, "Why did you bring her here, Kev? You know I don't mix with you people. Holly doesn't want me to mix." Kate suddenly was serious.

"Demetrius trailed me once," I said. "He knows my unit. When he finds Zoe gone he'll have a couple of ideas about where to look for her. And I want her on ice. I want her frightened. I want her to talk."

"Will she?"

ZOE DID NOT talk. We poured a half a pot of steaming, black coffee into her. We got her awake and sitting up. We made her furiously angry. But she did not talk. She clamped her child's lips and kept them clamped.

I finally gave up.

"Keep an eye on her," I told Kate.

"Where are you going?" She was suspicious again.

"Outside to sniff the night air. I might smell a Greek bum on the wind."

"Don't be a fool, Kev. He could be anywhere out there. You won't be able to see him in the dark."

I carried the .38 against my thigh as I walked down to my unit. I didn't want to kill Demetrius, but I might have to wing him to capture him. Nothing happened during my walk. And there was plenty of motel light. I was plenty exposed.

At my unit door, I fitted the key in the lock, hesitated. Was Demetrius inside, waiting for me in the darkness? I decided that if he was, I'd make a fine target when I pushed the door wide. And giving Demetrius *total* advantage didn't make sense. So I withdrew the key, turned back to the office, alert to any sound that might come from behind me.

The sound came from ahead. A motor revved suddenly. A scooter swung into the motel entry. There was a single figure on

the scooter, bent low over the handle bars.

Two shots sounded. Two slugs chipped concrete at my feet. I went down hard, rolled, came up on my elbows as the scooter made the quick U turn.

I leveled the gun on the rear wheel of the scooter, squeezed off a shot. Demetrius kept rolling. I started to squeeze the trigger again, then I reared up and yelled, "No!"

Kate, running low and carrying something long and slim in one hand, shot from the door of her unit to the scooter. I saw her jab with her secret weapon. I saw the scooter veer sharply. I heard Demetrius yell.

And then the scooter was down and Demetrius went into a long bloody slide across concrete. The slide ended when he slammed into the rear bumper of a parked sedan. He became a quiet, limp figure on the driveway.

Demetrius looked as if he was leaking blood from every pore when I got to him. He was skinned and unconscious, but alive. Kate, popeyed and breathing hard, squatted beside me.

"My God," she whispered, "did I kill him?"

"And you called me a fool!" I rasped.

"Is he dead?"

"No. And get off the hysteric button. Where's the girl? You're supposed to be watching her."

"I hit her over the head with a Coke bottle. She's quiet."

I groaned, cursed, then looked around on the scattering of curious that were now hanging in the doorways of the various units, still afraid to venture all the way outside.

"Take care of your customers," I said to Kate. "Keep 'em inside if you can."

She went off to placate and I walked over to shut off the motor of the scooter. There was a splintered broom wedged into the spokes of the front wheel. I shook my head, snapped off the motor, righted the scooter, picked the broom pieces from it, and tested the wheel. It still rolled.

I pushed the scooter over to Kate's apartment and inside, found the kick stand, braced it, then looked around for Zoe. She wasn't in sight.

I cursed and looked inside the bedroom. The flow of oaths stopped. Zoe was on the bed, her arms and legs spread wide, her lips parted and twisted as if caught in pain. She was unconscious and she was trussed. Kate had used hose to fashion the guy lines from Zoe's wrists and ankles to down and under the bed where examination revealed the hose were securely knotted in the springs.

I went next door to the office, used the headphone on the PBX board, called in the FBI for Zoe and an ambulance for Demetrius.

Then I went outside and stood guard over the not-so-hip hippie until the ambulance arrived. I satisfied my curiosity, too. I opened his jacket, looked at his chest. And it was there, okay: *The Lord Gives . . .*

At the hospital, Demetrius failed to respond and I finally got the bad news from a doctor who seemed to know unconscious people.

"It could be an hour, perhaps a day or two, maybe a week before he regains consciousness. In the meantime, the patient should be properly entered into the hospital if you will be so kind as to stop at the front desk, Mr. Kar."

"I was in no mood to be so kind."

It startled the doctor. "My goodness, we have to keep records, you know! And, of course, there is the matter of—well, payment upon the patient's recovery. Perhaps he has insurance?"

"I doubt it," I said, peeling off.

"But, Mr. Kar!" the doctor wailed. "Who do we bill?"

"Try Uncle Sam."

"Who?"

"Medicare," I threw at him over my shoulder.

He groaned, sounding as if he thought neither he nor the hospital ever would be paid.

I talked to the FBI people again, arranged for a twenty-four hour guard on Demetrius' doorstep, and then returned to the

motel. Things had settled. Everything looked normal, except the motor scooter in Kate's front room.

"And," she asked politely, "just what in the hell am I supposed to do with that thing? Sleep with it?"

"You could try me," I suggested.

"Out," she said, pointing to her door. "I've collaborated, been coerced enough for one night. Out. I sleep with a scooter."

"Demetrius and Zoe are not alone in this world," I reminded her. "There is the entire tribe. The Third People."

"You are suggesting?"

"That others might be looking for me now."

"And you don't want to return to your unit? You're frightened?"

"Scared to death," I grinned.

"All right," she snapped. "But you sleep on the couch. And you do not disrobe!"

"Yes, ma'am," I said humbly.

She entered her bedroom, shut the door firmly. The door did not open again until around one-thirty in the morning. I lay quiet on the couch, grinning at the shadows between me and the ceiling.

"I am opening the door only to get circulation," Kate announced from the darkness. "The air conditioning works better if there is proper circulation."

"Sure."

I seemed to have surprised her.

I heard a little gasp and then she said, "You are awake?"

"I can't seem to relax."

There was a pause. Then: "Well, perhaps if you took off some of your clothing—"

"I'm already down to shorts, doll."

"Oh." Another pause. "Well—"

"Doll?"

"Yes?"

"Have you got plans for this afternoon?"

"No, nothing urgent. Why?"

"Know where Baker Beach is?"

"Certainly."

"That's where we're going."

"We are?"

"To a love-in."

"What?"

"Think you come become a hip-hip-hooray girl for one afternoon?"

"A hipster?"

"Un-huh."

"Well—"

"There's a guy gonna be there I've got to get next to. A chief. It's important."

"Don't you think I'm a little old for—"

"No."

"Hmmm." Silence.

"Kev, maybe you should come in here—I mean, so we can sorta make plans."

"Anything for Holly and nation, doll," I said, swinging up from the couch.

THE HANDYMAN AT the motel thought Kate had lost her mind

overnight, but he donated a pair of coveralls that should have been discarded three years before. And the coveralls were all I needed. I used scissors, chopped off the legs, and then Kate and I spent the late hours of the morning rolling around on the beach, getting properly grimy. By one o'clock we were filthy enough. We managed to have Kate looking matted, black-streaked and horrible in fifteen minutes.

Then she dressed. She came out of her bedroom in white, satin pajamas and a white, filmy robe.

I grunted.

She gave me an impish grin and bolted from the apartment. When I got to the beach, she was rolling across the sand like tumbleweed across a desert. Startled motel guests retreated. Kate got up and ran to me, bouncing dangerously.

She tossed back her head and laughed.

"I already feel blown out. It's great!"

"My God," I rattled, "is there only you under—under—"

She cocked her head, preened, laughed again. "Don't tell me," she whispered, "Uncle Sam's most virile secret agent has suddenly discovered modesty?"

Then she hooked her arm in mine, turned me to the motel, banged her hip against me with every step and chortled, "What was it you said last night, Kevin-

baby? Anything for Holly and nation?"

We used Demetrius' motor scooter. Kate wrapped her arms around my waist and pressed against me and laughed all the way to Baker Beach, her robe billowing and flowing behind us. And a sense of wild exhilaration was on me, too.

I wheeled the scooter like a maniac, full throttle, zipping in and out of traffic, ignoring the catcalls and enjoying the drivers we sent careening toward curbside.

Baker Beach was packed. It seemed the entire tribe had turned out for the afternoon of sun and fun. Most of The Third People were youngsters, teenyboppers like Zoe, but some were slightly older, a bit more subdued, leaning toward talk of politics and free speech and peace movements and civil rights in lieu of love-making on the sand. And then there were a scattered few like the dame at my back.

She pinched my backside, giggled. Kate clung to my front side, scowled. The dame pinched again. I sat up, looked down on her. She had to be pushing fifty in years, but she wasn't that far out of shape in body. She wore an African print bloomer suit and had a tiny silver bell dangling from each earlobe. A string of the bells had been fastened to each ankle.

She grinned. She was toothy.

She put a brown cigarette against those teeth, pulled on it, grinned again. There was the smell of marijuana on the wind. She didn't seem to pay any attention to the boy who was busy feasting on her neck and shoulder.

She picked at my cutoff coveralls again and giggled.

"Hi, you-all," she purred. "Aah bet you-all are from Virginie, West Virginie, Teen-a-see or Kentuck. Aah'm from Geo'gia. Way down south in Geo'gia. Aah usta be a f'gid housewife. 'Majine? And lookit me now! My, this here boy achewin' on me is jus' drivin' me outta my cotton-pickin' mind, but he ain't the world, man. The world is here."

She grinned, lifted the marijuana cigarette, inhaled deeply, held the smoke as long as she could, and then exploded, "Yeah, man, thar's the world! You-all should see my brain, man. Clear, that's what it is. Freaked out. Like dawn after a deep, dark, stormy Geo'gia night. Know what I mean?"

"Kev," Kate said icily, tugging at me. "I'm on this side. And I'm not frigid. I never have been."

The dame cackled, turned to her boy.

"Cha'les-honey," she admonished, "you-all gonna make marks on me. Quit that, hear?"

The boy lifted his head. There was a dirty smirk in his eyes as he glanced at me. The dame grabbed him, slammed him against

her front. "Now, don' you-all take me se'ious, Cha'les-honey," she panted. "Don' you-all take me se'ious, atall. Jus' keep on doin' what you was doin'. I don' care 'bout no marks or—Oh!"

"What's the matter?" the kid growled.

"Here *he* comes!"

The kid belched. "Cool it, Mother. He ain't gonna look at you. There's too much young stuff 'round."

"Cha'les! You-all hu't me when you talk like that."

"Just cool it, will yuh?" the kid said, putting the dame back down on the sand and ringing a bell on her earlobe.

I kissed Kate ardently, my eyes wide open. The tribal chief passed. He was as Claudine had said: huge, erect, bulbous nose, lines down his cheeks, thick lips, a stubble of chin beard, dressed in a red robe and gold sandals.

He moved slowly, taking in everything, confident, amused, his ego swollen and still swelling by the admiration he was getting from his flock.

Trailing him slightly, one a bit to the right, one a bit to the left, were two heavies, both medium-statured, both alert, both oblivious to the adoration. They might have been twins. And they also were decked out in red and gold. But their eyes and heads were busy, their hands riding close to what I figured was a slit opening

in the red robes. Inside those slits, I imagined, were trouble-stemmers. Guns.

Just the sight of them made me want to reach down inside the coveralls and rip loose the strips of tape where I had plastered Kate's .38 against my belly.

From somewhere on down the beach there suddenly came the wail of a flute. Moments later, bongo drums provided the beat. Guitars came alive. And off in the distance a deep-toned saxophone cried.

Lovers stirred. Relaxed ones came to life. Couples stood. There was a general weaving of bodies, as if all were a part of a huge, undulating wave. And forty yards away now, threading carefully, was the tribal chief and his pals. They moved on down the beach, turned, came back. Kate shivered when they stopped directly in front of us.

I clasped her to my side, squeezed her. The chief swung around, looked down the beach on his bobbing flock. Suddenly he put both hands high into the air and cried out: "The Lord Gives!"

It triggered The Third People. There were shrieks of abandon as if this was an old-fashioned, Southern, revival meeting. The flute, the bongos, the guitars, the sax came on wild and strong. Couples whirled and danced in the sand. Somewhere a girl screamed: "Oh, God, love me!"

And I felt a tug on the bottom of my coveralls.

It was Mother. She was standing. Her eyes were alive with excitement. Junior was behind her, working feverishly on the back of her neck. She took a last pull on the marijuana cigarette, dropped it in the sand, ground it down with her bare foot.

"It's time," she cried out, "for love!"

She whipped around and gathered Junior into her arms.

I grabbed Kate's hand and yanked her along behind me. When she caught up, she gasped, "Where are we going?"

I nodded ahead. Three red robes were moving fast now. I saw a long, black, shiny sedan braked on the side of the highway above the beach.

Kate held back. "They'll see us!"

We were at the motor scooter. I mounted. She swung on behind. Her arms clamped my middle. Her hands found the gun taped to my belly. She moved her hands up, shuddered.

The sedan cut out. I throttled the scooter. We weaved through the sand, went up a slight incline, and then we were on the highway and rolling. Kate screamed in my ear: "Don't you know all you need to know?"

I knew nothing.

The sedan turned into a courtyard at a church in the city. The

iron, picket gates remained open. I tooled past the opening, went around the first corner, pulled into the curbing and cut the motor.

Kate breathed, "I hope you haven't got in mind what I think you have in mind."

"Take a bus out to the motel."

"In this outfit?" she wailed, looking down on herself. "And with my hair looking as if—"

"Then come on," I said, pulling her along the sidewalk.

WE ROUNDED THE corner of the iron fence. The church stood solid and ancient, far back from the sidewalk, geometrically placed shrubbery and trees completely shadowing the entire front of thick green sod.

I turned in at the open gate. Kate caught my arm, yanked. "Kevin, what are you doing?"

"Churches are for people," I said. "Even hippies."

"But—"

She gave up, danced along beside me. The long, black sedan had been braked in front of the steps that led up into the church. The sedan was empty. We went up the stone steps and into the shadow of entry. I stopped, reached inside my coveralls, loosed the strips of tape around the butt of the .38.

I heard Kate take a long, shuddering breath.

"Ready, doll?" I grinned on her.

I don't think she found any humor in the grin. Her mouth was set. Her cheeks danced. But her eyes were determined. And she nodded.

I escorted her into the church as if we were going to a funeral.

Inside, I figured we had a funeral. Ours.

The goons came from the right and the left. They moved in swiftly. I felt a gun muzzle against my ribs. Kate jerked, froze. Her goon also clamped fingers against the back of her neck.

"And now," she managed, "do we pray?"

My goon said, "You walk. Straight down the aisle."

We walked. We went up on the pulpit. We went around the right side of the pulpit. There was an open area behind the pulpit, a door in a wall. Kate's goon opened the door and we entered a windowless room.

The large tribal chief was peeling out of his disguise. He had a hawk nose, shaggy eyebrows, narrow lips, and smooth cheeks. He also had shed the robe, was bare-chested, and tattooed across his chest was: *The Lord Gives . . .*

More interesting, he was surrounded by an arsenal. Rifle stacked on rifle. Pistol stacked on pistol. Boxes of ammunition. Cases of grenades. Bazooka shells. One fifty caliber machine gun that I could see. Bayonets. In scabbards and out of scabbards.

Flares. There also were a couple of caskets, their lids open. On wheels.

And then there was the woman.

She was slouched against a far wall. She stood relaxed and confident, her arms crossed on her chest. A tiny silver bell dangled from each earlobe. She was smirking. She said, "Welcome, lovers."

And there was no Geo'gia accent now.

"And I assume," she said, "you realize you are in a predicament? I assume, Mr. Kar, you now realize you and your friend are in one helluva tight spot?"

"It's been my life story," I said, attempting to make my sigh sound weary.

"Yes," said the woman. "So I was just informed today. Some friends of mine in the Far East seem to remember your name." She left the wall support. "But all life stories must come to an end sometime. Right?"

"My dear, that sounds threatening."

"Search him, Palmer," the woman said, suddenly commanding.

What I had once thought to be the tribal chief moved in on me and found the .38 taped to my belly, naturally. He tossed it aside with complete disdain.

And then the woman said, "My name is Clara. And the man who just now disarmed you is the Reverend Palmer Taylor, pastor of

this church. Over there, those two men"—she swept the two goons with an arm—"are Harold and George. Harold on your right, George on your left. And this"—she made another sweep with her arm, this time taking in the arsenal—"is our cache. We're ambitious, don't you think, Mr. Kar?" She chuckled, eyed the two caskets.

"Those," she said, "have allowed us to build our dump. Who thinks a second time about a casket being brought into a church?"

"Right now," I said truthfully, "I'm thinking about one going out."

Clara laughed heartily. "And well you might!"

I felt a tug on my coveralls. Kate asked innocently, "Can I ask a question?"

"Shoot, doll."

"What happens to me?"

"There are two caskets," I said.

She nodded. "That's what I was thinking. Is it too late to get out some other way?"

"I dunno. Ask Clara."

"Clara?" Kate said.

Clara laughed again. "Harold?" She looked across the room at one of the goons.

"I like her, Clara," said the goon simply.

Clara shrugged. "See, honey? Harold saw you at the beach. He likes you."

"Tough for me, huh?" Kate said.

Clara looked amused. "It could be worse. I could have you shipped off to Peking."

"I'll take Harold, thanks."

"I thought you might—although you really don't have a choice." Clara suddenly shot for the door. "Palmer?"

The huge minister lumbered after her.

"George?"

One of the goons joined her.

She looked at Harold. "Thirty minutes?"

"That ain't much time," he complained.

"It's enough," she said shortly. "We'll be prepared for them in thirty minutes."

And then she was gone. The minister and the goon trailed after her.

HAROLD LOOKED downright beside himself. He shuffled his feet nervously and kept bobbing his gun.

"We don't die now?" I asked hopefully.

"Not here, man!" he burst. "Not in the church!"

"But what does happen in the church?"

He smirked suddenly, pointed the gun at me. "You face the wall. You put your hands on the wall."

He moved in on me. I faced the wall. I put my hands on the wall. I managed a side glance at Kate, who was suddenly white-faced.

"Luck," I said, and then a pis-

tol crashed down against the back of my skull.

I went down to the floor. Bells rang. Lights flashed inside my skull. I wasn't quite unconscious but I wasn't going to win any mobility contests either.

I saw the goon move in on Kate. He held the pistol threateningly over her head.

"We've only got thirty minutes," he said.

"You don't have to gun-whip me into submission," she replied, surprisingly calm. "Tough types turn me on. You know?"

"That right?" Harold lowered the gun slowly. "Damn! I had a hunch 'bout you on the beach, you know? I took one look at you and I said to myself, 'Now there's a woman who knows what makes the world go 'round.'"

"One thing, Harold," Kate said, "I don't like hard floors."

"It's all we've got, baby!"

"What about the caskets?"

He jerked. "What about 'em?"

"Aren't they soft inside?"

He poked his hand in one, pushed down. "Hey, you got an idea! Crazy, but an idea!"

Kate slammed the lid. Harold went two feet up off the floor and howled.

I also was up off the floor. Not like Harold, not speedy, but I was up. I staggered toward them. Harold swung around, the gun pointed at my middle. Kate swept down on him. She had grabbed up

a bayonet. She whipped it down against Harold's gun wrist.

He howled again, the gun flipped to the floor, blood spurted. And then Kate had Harold pinned to the casket, the point of the bayonet rammed against his spine, drawing blood. He danced a toe-tapping step, mixing oaths with gurgles of pain.

Kate looked at me wild-eyed over her shoulder. "What do I do now?"

I took the bayonet from her, reversed it, slammed the grip against Harold's ear. It left him draped and unconscious from the basket, his hand inside.

My head was clearing fast. I swept up a couple of hand grenades, found a rifle, shoved a clip of ammunition into it, worked the bolt, shot a slug into the chamber. Then I told Kate to open the door.

We stepped out behind the pulpit. Silence. We went around the pulpit. We had trouble. Two men marching down the center aisle toward us. A reverend and a goon.

I fired a round, dropped the goon. The Reverend Palmer Taylor dived into the pews. I unloaded the remainder of the clip, peppering the seats, but it wasn't enough. When I had finished, a minister shot at us from a side aisle.

I pulled the pin and arched a grenade. That was the end of a minister.

I caught Kate's hand. We raced

down the center aisle and outside.

The long, black sedan was careening down the drive. Clara was at the wheel. She smashed into an iron gate at the entry. We pounded toward her.

She backed the sedan, raced the engine, and limped out into the street.

We ran down the sidewalk. Once Kate gasped, "I am afraid I can't make it, Kevin. I can't make it—"

And then I had the motor scooter purring and Kate was clamped to my back and wheeling as I swung around in a circle from the curbing and lay around the corner to tail the sluggish sedan.

The sedan picked up speed, seemed to gain life. We shot into the downtown area. There were cops on motorcycles and inside squad cars after us now. Sirens wailed. Red lights flashed. Traffic darted.

The sedan curved into a left turn, running a red light. Clara didn't make it. A station wagon, careening wildly on screeching brakes, nicked the back end of the sedan, bounced it up toward a sidewalk.

I managed to dodge the station wagon, whip through the turn, saw the sedan crumple up against a

street lamp, then wheeled into a sliding U turn and roared back.

Clara was out of the sedan and staggering along the street when I shot past her with an arm extended. The arm flipped her off her feet and slammed her down against concrete.

Clara was unconscious, sprawled flat on her back. The cops wanted to know what in the hell was going on. They thought it was a domestic quarrel.

I told them what in the hell was going on. It was no domestic quarrel.

But, naturally, they figured I was some kind of weirdo, riding a vision train.

I mean, it's difficult when you're standing around in cutoff coveralls and a hand grenade—nothing else—and trying to explain to bunch of cops.

Kate made it even more difficult. She weaved up to me in her white hide-nothing, her matted hair, her streaked-black face, and she rattled, "Hasn't this been exciting, man?"

"Please?" I pleaded.

"I feel as if I've been freaked out all the way!"

"Ungh."

A cop mumbled, "Hippity-dodda. Ain't the captain gonna love these two?"

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THE DAY of THE DEAD

by
JAIME SANDAVAL



*Somewhere in that place of
the dead a murderer waited—
waited for me, his next prey.*

JUAREZ, CHIHUAHUA, Mexico is a bordertown just minutes away from downtown El Paso, Texas. Its main street, Avenida Juarez, is a neon-lit circus of souvenir shops, restaurants, honky tonks, and side-walk vendors. The crowds surging along its dirty alamedas are made up of tourists, conventioners from the El Paso hotels, servicemen from the nearby airbase and the Army missile training center, pimps and steerers for the cheap brothel-bars lining the side streets, and smugglers like me.

I pushed my way through the human traffic in the doorway of a steak house called *Palacio de Caesar*, and sat down at a table facing the entrance.

Before I could signal Gomez to bring me the usual margarita, a girl squirmed through the loungers blocking the doorway and came directly toward my table. She was young, good-looking, neat, trim, and completely feminine. Her long blonde hair seemed to bounce on the shoulders of her white linen dress as she walked.

"Mr. Stark," she said when she reached me. It wasn't a question.

"You can call me Karl," I answered, wondering who had given her my name.

I pulled out a chair for her, and she sat down. Gomez arrived with my margarita, and I looked at her inquiringly. She started to say no, changed her mind, and nodded yes.

"What can you do for me?" I said when Gomez left to get her drink.

"I have a—I have a proposition for you," she said after a second's hesitation.

"I like to make my own," I said, and watched her blush. I'd thought blushing was a lost art.

She lowered her voice. "I want you to smuggle a man across the border into Texas for me." I stared at her as though she were out of her mind, and she colored again. "I'll pay you well," she whispered.

"Let's begin by you telling me who you are and how you got the idea I'd be interested in anything like that," I suggested.

"I'm Jean Westmore," she said. "My father was Judge Westmore."

"Then you're the one who took the full page ad in the El Paso paper—"

"I'm the one who offered fifty thousand dollars for information leading to the arrest and conviction of my father's murderer," she interrupted me. Her tone was defiant.

Old Judge Westmore had estab-

lished a reputation for incorruptibility during the slant-well trials held in Midland and Odessa. The operators who had been angling their shafts into the pools of oil under their neighbors' land had offered him a seven figure bribe, but they had ended up with a few extra years in Huntsville for their mistake.

When a land scandal made headlines in El Paso later, Judge Westmore had been brought in again. A speculator named Tom Costanza was accused of acquiring land from the city for a fraction of its value and then selling the same parcels back to the city at a huge profit.

It was a complicated business, and in the middle of the trial the judge went down into Old Mexico with a group from a lawyers' convention. He became separated from them somehow and wasn't seen again until his body was found along the road to White Sands with half a dozen .45 caliber slugs in it. Then a key witness disappeared while a new trial was being convened, and the state's case disappeared with him. Tom Costanza went free.

"The fact that you're Judge Westmore's daughter doesn't explain why you're here," I said, lighting a cigarette and pushing the pack toward her.

She ignored the cigarettes. "I know who killed my father," she said softly. "I want you to get him

across the border for me and make him admit that he was paid by Tom Costanza."

There was a small space between her front teeth that was oddly attractive. "When you sat down here, you were talking about smuggling. Now it's kidnaping. Why not tell me the whole story, including the source of your information and how you happened to know me?"

Gomez brought her drink, and she paused to wet her lips with it. "My father was killed here in Mexico by a man named El Cuchillo," she said when we were alone again.

"El Cuchillo," I repeated. "The Knife. What else do you know?"

"I know what he looks like. He's six two, weighs a hundred ninety pounds, and has a six-inch scar on his right cheek. And I know he'll be at the cemetery south of town sometime tomorrow."

"That's detailed information, all right," I agreed. "But how do you know?"

"Because his parents are buried there, and tomorrow is El Dia de los Muertos, the day Mexicans honor their dead."

I shook my head. "That's not what I meant. How do you know so much? Who told you?"

She hesitated. "A man is claiming the reward I offered," she said at last. "I can't tell you who he is, because I promised not to, but I'm certain he knows what he's talking

about." Her eyes were squarely upon mine, unblinkingly sincere in the guileless expression I always associate with fools.

"I don't see my picture yet in your jigsaw puzzle, Jean."

"The man suggested that I hire you," she said rapidly. "He said there isn't sufficient evidence to go through normal legal channels, especially since Mexico doesn't like to turn its nationals over to United States courts, but that you're smart and tough and could get him over the border for me."

I'd never been hijacked in my little business ventures, which might have qualified me as smart, and the few who'd tried it had found it wasn't habit-forming, which might make me tough, but even for a girl as attractive as Jean Westmore, I'm not comfortable on the side of the angels. "What's in it for me?" I asked.

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Make it fifteen," I bargained automatically.

"Fifteen it is."

"With five in advance."

She opened her handbag and brought out a thick bundle of fifties with a paper band around them. From the crowded condition of her handbag, I could see that she was prepared for an expensive trip. I dropped the packet into my jacket pocket.

"Where are you staying, Jean?"

"At the Hotel Rosado," she said.

I couldn't keep the look of disapproval from my face. "Why would a girl like you stay at that fleabag?"

"Because I was told to." Her tone was defiant again, but she looked worried. "Is it really that bad?"

"Push your dresser in front of your door tonight. I'll pick you up at nine in the morning. Nothing happens in this town before eleven."

She rose from her chair after a moment's uncertainty, meekly accepting her dismissal. "Nine o'clock," she said. "And thank you, Mr. Stark. I'm in room two hundred fourteen."

I watched the youthful swing of her hips in the linen suit as she moved toward the door.

Gomez caught me at it as he returned to the table to take my dinner order. "A beautiful girl, señor," he suggested.

"A blithering idiot," I said grumpily. "Bring me the steak, Gomez, and make it rare. Rare, you understand? If you burn it up—" I told him in Spanish what I would do to him if he burned it up, and he smiled.

Spanish is an expressive language.

At six o'clock the next morning I went down the back fire escape of the Hotel Rosado and crossed town to my apartment to get a couple of hours' sleep. I'd spent the night patrolling the second floor

corridor of the hotel, but nothing of moment had taken place outside the door of Room 214. Something should have happened, and the fact that it hadn't was enough to make me wonder if I was losing my touch.

I was back inside the Rosado promptly at nine, using the front entrance this time. I was on my way down the second floor corridor again, perfectly familiar with the dirty handmarks on the white-washed walls, when I heard a scream, the half-choked female scream which ambiguously conveys pain, pleasure, or a combination of both. I lengthened stride. It shouldn't be happening in broad daylight, but—

When I followed the corridor's right angle turn, the door of Room 214 was ajar, and the continued screams were coming from Room 214. As I gathered momentum, I could see Jean Westmore being held down in a chair by a man in dark blue suit who stood behind her. He was twisting one arm behind her back, and her blonde hair was swinging wildly as she sought to free her mouth from the hand he had clamped over it.

I went through the door like some idiot knight on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, and I was just reaching for the woman-holding type when something smashed into the side of my head.

I went reeling into the wall. A second blow, to the neck this time,



sent me to my knees. I had one quick look at another dark blue suit while a sandbag hurtled toward my head, and I didn't have the mustard to move out of the way. Then the lights went out.

I came to on my back on the hotel room floor.

Lieutenant Juan Casado-Marin of the Juarez police was standing over me. He was a slender, dark-skinned man with shiny black hair and eyes that always seemed half-closed. A row of thin cigars protruded from the breast pocket of his expensive sport coat. He wore the yanqui-go-home expression that he always favored in his contacts with me.

A dozen or more people were in the corridor, crowding around the open door, and the lieutenant walked over and closed it.

I hoisted myself to a sitting position and saw that we were alone in the room. Jean Westmore and the two dark blue suits had disappeared.

"*Que pasa?*" Casado-Marin snapped at me as he returned to my side.

I shrugged. "*No se.*"

He pursed his lips lightly and kicked me in the ribs with his

broad-toed shoe. I let him hear a few words of Mexican-Spanish that aren't found in dictionaries.

"A group went down the rear stairway and drove off," he said, speaking better English than I do Spanish. His tone was silky. "You know, Stark, I'm your only friend in this town. You have acquaintances, but I'm your friend. Don't you think you should tell me what happened?" He kicked me again, affectionately.

Since he was my only friend and he put it so persuasively, I told him about the two men who had been in the room, plus the comic-book story that Jean Westmore had fed me. In the process I neglected to mention the five thousand dollar advance and the fact that I was supposed to kidnap a Mexican citizen at the cemetery.

Casado-Marin held out his hand and helped me to my feet. "For once, you've bitten off too much," my only friend said. "*El Cuchillo*—" he shook his head somberly. "*—un hombre muy malo.*"

I stumbled to the bathroom and ran water in the sink. I put my head under the tap a couple of times, then returned to the room where the lieutenant was waiting. The sandbag had left me unmarked, but I didn't think I could say the same for the lieutenant's shoe.

"Who do you think the hoods in the dark blue suits were?" I asked. "Friends of *El Cuchillo*?"

"They didn't look Mexican to me. Besides, he'd simply have had her killed." Casado-Marin reached into my pocket and helped himself to one of my American cigarettes, but he didn't seem to have any ideas to offer in exchange.

"Tom Costanza wouldn't have cared for that reward offer, you know," I went on. "At the least it would make him want to silence his hired gun."

"So these two were after El Cuchillo?" The lieutenant sounded amused. "Why would they take the *senorita*?"

"Maybe they couldn't find El Cuchillo, but knowing he'd want the reward offer stopped, too, they decided to use the girl as bait to get to him."

He blew a cloud of smoke in my face. "That's a lot of maybes."

I let it go. "How did you happen to arrive so providentially, Lieutenant?"

He smiled. "I happened to be in the hotel, visiting a lady friend, and I heard the noise." His smile widened. "I'm curious to know how you propose to handle this—this commission." He flipped the cigarette to the floor and ground it under his heel. "I'm sure a smart *contrabandista* like you will think of something, though."

"I wish I was as sure as you are."

Casado-Marin waved airily, walked to the door, and disappeared down the corridor. I was

relieved to see him go. If the two hoods were after El Cuchillo, they had probably forced Jean Westmore to tell them where she expected to find him. I had to get to the cemetery, and quickly.

Outside in the car, I pulled into the morning traffic and broke the speed law while heading south. With El Cuchillo dead, if they could find him, the hoods wouldn't need Jean Westmore alive any longer. I checked automatically to see whether a car was following me or if someone might be using the more sophisticated front-end tail, but there was nothing.

For once in my life I wished I hadn't always been a lone wolf. If I was right about what was going to happen at the cemetery, I could use company.

Although it was still early, there were quite a few cars parked near the cemetery when I arrived. Families were placing flowers on graves, or searching for markers which were small by American standards, only a few standing as high as eighteen inches. I removed my sport coat so I'd more closely resemble the men moving between the graves, took my .38 from the glove compartment and slipped it into my waistband, then pulled out my sport shirt to cover it.

I left the car and stepped over the low stone wall surrounding the graveyard, trying to look inconspicuous.

I moved from group to group,



always with an eye on the road, studying the new cars as they arrived. A white four-door sedan caught my eye by driving into the cemetery grounds—most of the cars had remained along the edge of the road outside—and parking alongside the caretaker's cottage. No one got out, but I could see a dark blue suit at the wheel and another in the rear with a blonde haired woman.

I angled toward the car, switching from one group of mourners to another. When I was twenty yards from the car, I dropped to the ground behind one of the taller grave markers, dragging out my

revolver. The people near me took one look and fled, pulling their children along after them.

I put a slug through the left front tire and two more in the grill in the general area of the carburetor. The driver's door burst open and a dark blue suit leaped out, tugging at a shoulder holster. I lined him up and fired. He pitched forward on his face and lay still.

The other one jumped out, keeping the car between me and him. He made a dash for the caretaker's cottage, but halfway around the corner of the building he was exposed for an instant.

I was about to squeeze off another shot, but someone beat me to it. There were two claps of thunder and the running man tried to twist in two directions at once. He ended up in a crumpled heap, staring sightlessly at the morning sky.

Lieutenant Casado-Marin came from behind the building, stopped briefly at the white sedan, then came over to me. He had a thin cigar clamped between his teeth and a silver-plated Colt .45 in his right hand.

"*Que tal?*" he asked.

"Okay," I answered, getting to my feet and brushing myself off. "How's Miss Westmore?"

"Just a bit roughed up." He glanced around. "After these fireworks, I'm afraid El Cuchillo won't show up today."

The mourners had fled the cem-

etery. Some were watching from the other side of the wall, but the majority had climbed into their cars and were racing away. Jean Westmore emerged shakily from the disabled car and made a wide detour around the man I'd killed. When she reached us, reaction had set in fully—her hands were shaking and she looked green. I put my arm around her.

"Let me handle this," Casado-Marin said as four uniformed police leaped from a van and charged toward us with carbines at the ready.

"Be my guest," I said.

"I'll say you killed them both," he went on. "It's justifiable homicide in any case, but it saves red tape if a gringo is on the books for killing them."

He used his rank to hurry the proceedings along, saying he'd collect our statements later. I stood holding Jean until the bodies had been removed and the police had left. Then we all walked toward my car. "Once again you arrive providentially, Lieutenant," I said. "How?"

"Maybe I followed you."

"No one followed me."

"Oh, what's the use of keeping secrets!" Jean broke in. "I'll never catch El Cuchillo now, anyhow. Lieutenant Casado-Marin is the man who claimed the reward, Mr. Stark."

"Somehow it figures," I said. He was grinning at me openly.

"Give me a lift to my car," he said.

I still had my arm around Jean. I tossed him my car keys with my free hand.

"You drive," I said, and climbed into the back seat with Jean.

Casado-Marin drove to the rear of the cemetery and pulled up behind his own car. I leaned forward and placed the barrel of my revolver against the base of his skull.

"Not a twitch," I said. "Or I'll splash your brains all over the windshield." I nudged Jean. "Meet El Cuchillo."

I could hear her swallow. "El—you're joking!"

"It's as much as there ever was of him," I insisted. "This mutt killed your father for a price, heard about the reward and told you he had information for you to lure you down here where he could get at you in relative safety. Then he heard that a couple of Tom Costanza's boys were looking for him, so he told you to hire me. He planned to kill them and have me available as a U.S. citizen to pin the killings on. He'd have killed you and blamed your death on me, too, then killed me while I was resisting arrest."

"But—but you have no proof!" she exclaimed.

I was watching the pallor overtaking Lieutenant Casado-Marin's dark features, and I knew I didn't need any proof.

"He doesn't even have much imagination," I told Jean. "Is it

likely that a man nicknamed The Knife would use the forty-five caliber cannon that killed your father? But lieutenant has a forty-five, and he knows how to use it. It's probably the murder weapon. He's so sure of himself he probably didn't even change barrels."

Casado-Marin's frozen-looking lips parted. "Mirra—" he croaked.

"You look," I broke in. "You told Jean her father was killed in Mexico, and you had no reason to lie about it. But his body was found in New Mexico. Who else had a shiny badge, a special border pass, and an official car to move a murdered man across the border?"

He made a lunge toward his gun and I rapped him with the .38. Jean turned away as I hit him a few more times than was strictly necessary to knock him out. Then

I bound and gagged him and threw him into the back seat.

"Drive him to the border in my car, Jean," I told her. "Stop at Cus-toms and call in the cops. He can't prove he killed your father in Mexico, and once he's in the states no one will care how he got there. He'll try to earn a life sentence by doing a lot of talking about Tom Costanza. I'll drive his car back to town and abandon it, and I'll meet you at the Palacio de Caesar when you've delivered the stuff."

"How can I ever thank you?" she said, taking my hand.

"Besides paying me the rest of the money?"

"Of course!"

"I just might have it figured out by the time you get back," I said.

Jean Westmore was still blushing when she drove away.

In the Next Issue—

MURDER IS MY ACCOMPLICE

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

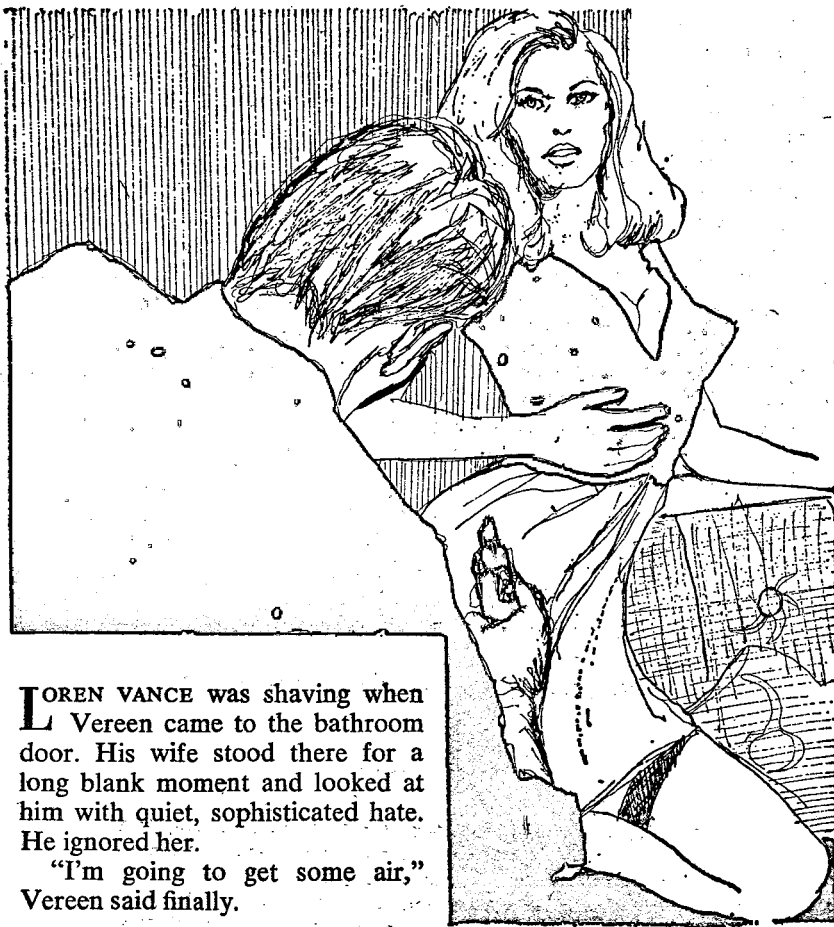
by BRETT HALLIDAY

She was too young, too desirable to think of dying, this lost lady whom Death had marked for his own. For somewhere out there in the darkness was a killer who knew only too well the price—and the payment—of Murder. It was impossible. Yet somehow Mike Shayne must find and break the dark chain that was sending them to hell!

Mace Murders

by ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

The road to Murder is a one-way street. And now he knew—Death barred the long way back.



LOREN VANCE was shaving when Vereen came to the bathroom door. His wife stood there for a long blank moment and looked at him with quiet, sophisticated hate. He ignored her.

"I'm going to get some air," Vereen said finally.

"Yes, my dear."

"Try not to come home totally blotto tonight," she said to him.

"Yes, my dear." He didn't remove his eyes from his foam-faced reflection in the mirror. "I'm to take it then that you won't be joining us in the rumpus room for the celebration?"

"I told you that earlier, Loren. I don't have a damn thing in the world to celebrate."

Then he looked at her, grinning.

"Well, my dear, you can't win 'em all."

"When have I won any? You certainly weren't any prize package." With that she walked out.

Vance wiped his face hurriedly, listening for the bang of the screen door. When he heard it he went into their sleeping quarters and picked up his shirt. He paused by the screen door a moment. He had to give her a head start.

Their room was at the rear end of the Society's compound. Their door opened under the archway in the tall mud wall and there was a small gate close at hand which led up to the digs. Vance knew very well that his wife was holding an assignation there in the ruins.

He stepped into the blue shadows under the arch, pausing first to check the interior of the compound. The Egyptian workers had departed for the night. The other members of the archaeological

team were in their quarters—Lefrew, Balch, Stevens, and Vanbraam, the chief of the dig.

Richard Kraur was not there, of course. He would be waiting in the ruins.

Vance went through the gate, checking to be sure he had his key. Vanbraam made a point of locking up every night because some of the artifacts they kept in the compound had a certain value, and the native workers knew it. Vance started up the starlit path.

As on three earlier occasions, he walked cat-footed. It would not suit his purpose to disturb the lovers. He was coming as an eavesdropper, not as an outraged cuckold.

He slipped into the shadows, thrown by the roofless old half-walls and went down a rubbly lane to an abandoned courtyard. There he stopped. The joined silhouettes of his wife Vereen and Richard Kraur were sitting on a large limestone block just beyond a dirt-filled pool.

"My god, he couldn't have refused. He doesn't care a damn about you."

"I'm well aware of it," Vereen replied despondently. "But it's his nature, his mean little nature. What he has he hangs on to. He's penurious about everything."

"Does he know about us?"

"No, I'm certain he doesn't suspect a thing. I tell you it's just his way. When I asked him for a di-

voice today, he simply laughed. When I tried to argue with him, he struck me. Said he would see me in hell first. That's that."

Vance grinned in the dark. He had known about this illicit affair for some time. Sadistically, the hopelessness of it had amused him. He had been listening there in the ruins the night Kraur had told Vereen that he was going to clear out, ask the Society for an assignment somewhere else. And he had heard Kraur ask Vereen to go with him.

Vereen had agreed to ask Loren for a divorce. The very next morning fat old Vanbraam had uncovered Menes' mace in the ruins. That's when the plan had started to flourish in Vance's mind . . .

The mace was about thirteen inches long, with an alabaster head and a gold-plated handle. A gold cow head of the goddess Hathor was affixed to the end of the stock.

If it was what Vanbraam and his associates thought it was, then it had been in the ground for 5000 years. It meant that it had belonged to King Menes the Thinite, the reputed founder of the First Dynasty. It meant that the artifact was priceless.

Lefrew had been convinced of the mace's authenticity; Vanbraam had been breathlessly hopeful; Balch had been optimistically cautious; Stevens had been

dubious, and Kraur had reserved comment. But Loren Vance, who had made the hieratic translation on the handle, was absolutely certain.

A Smasher of Foreheads Is He . . . He Sparer Not and There Is No Remnant. That, supposedly, had been Menes' personal creed.

If only Vance could have been the one who had found the mace! He knew exactly what he would have done. Kept it a secret from the others. Vanbraam of course—that moral-minded Dutch idiot—would beamingly turn it over to the Society. Then he would receive his little well-done pat on the back and they would all be given a little bonus and that would be that.

But Vance knew of a certain shrewd Egyptologist in Cairo who had a connection with a mysterious and highly discreet buyer of rare artifacts . . .

"THEN THERE'S only one thing left for us to do," Kraur said. "If he won't agree to a divorce, we'll simply take French leave. We'll go to the States and fight him in court."

"You mean run away? Here and now?"

"Exactly. I can't go and leave you with him."

Vance's grin deepened. He cocked his head like an alert dog.

"No," Vereen said. "We can't do that. The Society would be

outraged if you ran off with another man's wife. The scandal would ruin you in your profession. We can't possibly start off in that manner. It's out of the question."

Vance's grin faded. He hadn't expected *that*!

Once he had put his mind to it, the problem of gaining possession of the priceless mace had become quite simple. He would force Vereen into an act of desertion by refusing to grant her a divorce. In passionate desperation she and Kraur would quietly slip away like Arabs in the night. Then Vance would steal the mace from Vanbraam. And everyone would assume that Kraur and Vereen were the culprits.

And now that damned female had to go and turn practical and ruin his plan! He listened a while longer, hoping that Kraur would be successful in changing her mind. But no. She wouldn't listen to reason. Stupid witch!

He went back down the path to the locked gate. It was time for the celebration. He felt about as much like it as his wife did.

THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS were gathering in the rumpus room. It was a large mud-walled room housing a card table, pingpong table, dartboard, and six or seven fusty old stuffed chairs that the Society had dumped there in the 1923 dig.

The celebration was for the dis-

covery of the mace. After two days of discussion and argument and a careful rehash of old musty facts, Vanbraam had become firmly convinced that the mace had indeed belonged to King Menes. Now he and the others were as busy as sailors drinking themselves into a rosy state of befuddled wits.

Vance didn't have the heart for it. He worked on a flat Tom Collins and morosely watched Vanbraam flourish the mace. The fat little Dutchman kept the precious mace on his person at all times, stuck into his tight belt with his jacket zipped snugly over it. Lefrew joked that it must hurt like the devil when Vanbraam rolled over in his sleep.

Kraur made his entrance at about ten. For appearance sake, Vance thought sulkily. Well, their unhappy assignation was over for the night, and now Vereen had undoubtedly returned to her room and swallowed her usual sleeping pill.

That was another thing Vance hated about his wife: the knowledge that she loathed him to such an extent that she deliberately took the powerful opiate every night, just to thwart any sudden amorous inclination he might have.

Vanbraam was getting disgustingly potted. And the others were growing noticeably high. Even Kraur seemed to be making a de-

terminated—desperate, probably—attempt to catch up.

And Vereen was probably knocked out on her pill.

Abruptly, Vance stood up and went to the bottles and ice on the sideboard.

"How about another all around?" he said gaily.

He watered his own down to a nub but spiked the others with a vengeance. Plan Number Two was beginning to crackle in his brain like fire in a cornbrake. It was actually a takeoff of Plan Number One but with heavy and drastic embellishments. It was far more risky than Number One, but in many respects it was far superior.

It was just after midnight when he decided to make his move. Silly old Vanbraam was trying to give Stevens a rap on the head with the mace, shouting, "A smasher of foreheads am I!" Lefrew and Balch were having a furious pingpong game, without the ball, and Kraur was lounging in a chair laughing at the antics.

"Gotta make a trip!" Vance announced in pretended drunkenness. He reeled out the door and into the darkened compound. Then he straightened up and made a beeline to his quarters.

Vereen, as he had suspected, was deeply rooted in the Land of Nod. He raised the webby mosquito net and sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up his pillow—the ironic touch.

It was one of the simplest acts he had ever performed. His wife never knew she had been smothered.

HE UNLOCKED THE gate and returned for his wife's body. They kept the Society jeep parked just outside the gate. The cab was enclosed and he put the body in the black shadow pool in the back. She couldn't be seen there.

He reentered the compound and went into the workshop where they cleaned and repaired the artifacts, found a long limber strand of wire and took it back to the jeep and wired the door handle on the passenger side. Then he tried it from the inside. Right. No one would get out through that door.

Once again he returned to the compound, taking up a nervous position in the shadows under the archway. He chain-smoked his way through half a pack of cigarettes, impatiently watching the lighted and rowdy-sounding rum-pus room across the yard.

It was two before the party broke up.

They stumbled down the wooden steps and lurched into the yard, Lefrew and Stevens supporting fat little Vanbraam, who was obviously out on his feet. Balch and Kraur brought up the reeling rear.

Vance watched them guide the befuddled Vanbraam to his room. Five minutes later the four of

them returned to the yard and staggered off to their separate beds.

Kraur's room was just across the archway from Vance's quarters. Vance waited until Kraur weaved his way into the shadows, then he spoke in an urgent whisper.

"Kraur! I need your help."

Kraur lurched to a wobbly halt. "What?"

"Vereen has run off," Vance told him.

"What? Run off? Where—"

"We had a fight, a bad one. I came back to the room potted, of course. She was waiting up for me. She demanded that I give her a divorce. I refused. We lost our heads. She threw something; I hit her. Then she ran."

"She—did she say *why* she wanted a divorce?"

"No, no. Just general principles, I suppose. But that's not important now. Thing is, I'm afraid she'll get hurt out there in the dark by herself. Will you help me find her?"

"Yes, certainly! Where'd she go?"

"Down the road toward the river. We'll take the jeep. I'd better drive. I'm pretty well sober now."

"Shouldn't we tell the oth—"

"No. This is a private matter. Get in, get in."

Kraur clipped his head on the top of the doorjamb trying to get into the jeep. He didn't seem to

think it strange that Vance steered him in through the driver's side. He slumped in the little bucket-seat and rubbed vigorously at his face, trying to clear his ginny mind.

Vance turned the switch, flicked on the lights, and they started down the road, following on around the curved base of the stubby hill. He knew exactly where he was going; a mile down the road, then turn left onto a dark plain and straight ahead for one hundred yards—to a point where the bluff abruptly dropped to the river forty feet below.

The water was right against the bluff at that spot. It was deep and it was always as opaque as green pea soup.

Karoo shrubs became activated by the jolting forward rush of the jeep, springing grotesquely into the white smear of headlights, then leaping as suddenly back into the waiting darkness. Kraur leaned forward, straining his eyes at the flowing white-and-black night, apparently having trouble with his focus.

Vance spun the wheel and they left the road with a spine-jarring bump, clattering and bouncing now across a plain of parched gama grass.

"Thought I saw something over here!" Vance cried. "Hang on!"

He slipped his left hand to the door handle and eased it open, holding it that way, just off the

latch. The jeep jerked, bucked, careened wildly over the rough terrain. Kraur was clutching to the wired doorhandle and to the back of Vance's seat to keep his head from being crowned on the ceiling of the cab.

Vance cut his speed to twenty. He sucked his breath, peering intently ahead, knowing that it was coming soon now, the dropoff—very soon. They hit a mean stone and the jeep leaped and Kraur's left hand flew up and then dropped behind the seat and fumbled around for a fresh grab.

"My God!" he gasped, sitting bolt upright and starting to turn in his seat. "What's this? A leg! Vance, *a leg!* Nylon stock—"

There it was in the headlights, the sharp sudden dirt edge with the void of blackness beyond.

"You've had your hand on it before!" Vance yelled. "Recognize it?"

He shot open the door and shoved his body through it, flying into the racing black air with the turtle-green weeds scampering hurriedly toward him, under him, and—*whomp!* Hit—bounding into blazing stars and spinning into—*uuah!* Hit again, and all the stars creaming into a sickening revolving smear. Then they righted, somewhat, and he was half up on his elbows and saw the taillights drop out of sight.

He shoved up to his feet as he heard the god-awful crashing



splash, and stumbled over to the edge of the bluff.

Far below, a cone-shape of light gleamed opaquely under the olive-green water. That was all, except for a rush of bubbles and an expanding circle of ripples.

He stayed there, staring down at the quietly glowing surface, until the lights dimmed and went out. That, as his wife had said, was that.

IT WAS NEARLY 3:30 when Loren Vance reached the compound. The place was wrapped in star-

dark sleep. He remembered to lock the gate after him. It wouldn't do to leave it open and have someone suggest that Vanbraam had forgotten to lock it, thus providing the possibility of an Arab sneak-thief. No, it had to look like Kraur.

He entered his room and got his flashlight; then he slipped along the wall in the thick shadows cast by the overhead thatched fretwork of palm leaves, to Vanbraam's room.

He paused at the Dutchman's door, to look, to listen. It was the time of Egyptian night that is vast, endless, and everything is dead. No man's time. Not belonging to the intricate mechanism of clocks that control worldly minutes, but rather to the watery drips of an old long-entombed Pharaoh's clepsydra. Cosmic time.

The time was right. It was now. He stepped inside, closed the door and thumbed on the flashlight. The white cone of light, playing over the spartan room, over the board floor with its rush rug, showed him the pale gray block of Vanbraam's netted bed.

He couldn't see through the net at that distance. He went tiptoe across the room and put the light against the filmy curtain. Vanbraam was flat on his back; his round tummy protruding hill-like under his sheet, his mouth open. He was making wet *zzzgumph* noises in his sotted sleep.

Vance raised the edge of the net and tossed it up on the canopy. Slowly, holding his breath, the beam of light suspiciously glaring at Vanbraam's moist face, he eased back the sheet.

The drunken archaeologists had rolled him into the sack fully dressed, except for his shoes. With the utmost care.

Vance trolled down the zipper on Vanbraam's rumpled corduroy jacket.

The alabaster-and-gold mace was not in Vanbraam's belt.

Well—that wasn't really so startling, was it? What the hell. The fat fool wouldn't actually sleep with it on his stomach, would he? Vance wiped his damp left hand on the side of his pants. His heart was beating fast.

All right. Maybe he sleeps with it tucked in beside him, or under his pillow, or under his mattress. No panic. Just take it easy. Feel alongside his body . . .

Vanbraam opened his bleary eyes and blinked wetly at the light. He looked right into Vance's suddenly-contorted face.

Vance hit him with the flash—had to—couldn't afford to be recognized at this stage of the game. Clopped him just above the eyes. Vanbraam went *Ahhh!* and his arms flew at Vance's head and, furiously horrified, Vance swung the flashlight again, again, the blows landing heavily.

Vanbraam's pudgy arms

flopped to his sides. His eyes started to roll up into his head, but stopped, became fixed.

Gasping, Vance reeled back from the bed, the old prophetic words of King Menes' creed tumbling noiselessly over and over in his brain: *a smasher of foreheads is he . . . he spares not he spares not he spares not . . .*

He stopped the panic, marshaling his harassed thoughts into alignment, centralizing his mental forces on one prime objective.

The mace. You've gone this far, now make it mean something. Find the mace!

He tried. He searched. He tore the bed apart, hating the physical contact with the glaze-eyed, sweaty obese body that always seemed to be in the way. All around the warm fat damp corpse, under the pillow, under the mattress, under the bed, even on top of the canopy.

End result: Blank.

Many round empty zeros concatenated in his mind like a chain of heavy iron rings and started to clitter-clatter a maddening melody of *nothing nothing nothing*.

What—three people murdered for that? For nothing? He couldn't believe it.

Now wait—it was only Lefrew's lousy joke that had made him think Vanbraam actually slept with the mace. Naturally he wouldn't. No one in his right mind would. He put it away somewhere

before he turned in at night. Yes. And tonight, even as drunk as he was, he'd had enough rationality left to remember to hide the mace before he had passed completely out.

That's it! It's somewhere in this room. Has to be. Where?

He tore into Vanbraam's desk, scattering drawers and papers right and left. Zero again. He ripped into Vanbraam's wall locker dumping jackets, pants, shirts, robe in a heap on the floor. Same thing. Nothing. He threw open Vanbraam's foot locker, slinging out shorts, socks, pajamas, Bible, old *National Geographics* from the Forties. Blank. He attacked Vanbraam's medicine cabinet, sweeping soap, toothbrush, razor, witch hazel, talcum, first-aid kit from the shelves. He—

He slumped into the chair by the rifled desk.

The crystalline lens on the flashlight stared balefully into a blank corner of the room, where a lone spider paused suspiciously against the mud wall.

Mechanically Vance snipped off the light. The first faint gray courier of dawn was beginning to slide over the screened windows. The night bugs gave up and droned quietly off to wherever it was they hid by day. Probably in the bulrushes along the river, where something else was now hidden; a sunken corpse-choked jeep.

Huh! For nothing. All for nothing. Didn't seem possible. Seemed like a bad dream. Maybe when he awoke later on, that's all it would be. Just a very bad dream. Yes, maybe so.

He stood up and walked out of the dead man's room. He moved somewhat like a dead man himself.

He woke at nine. The white hot sun had pooled itself in the compound and already his room was like an oven. He heard distant voices chattering excitedly in Arabic.

He sat up with a grunt.

So they've found him, he thought. Best make my innocent appearance then.

He dressed himself and stepped into the oven-like compound. Lefrew, Balch and Stevens were in the center of the yard holding a confab. The Arab and Egyptian boys were clustered in front of the cookshack. Vance started walking toward his friends. They broke off their gab and turned to watch him come. Their tanned faces were very set and stiff, quite expressionless.

"What's wrong?" Vance asked. "What's bugging the boys?"

"Something rather nasty has occurred," Stevens said in his typical English way.

Vance, just in time, remembered the part he had to play.

"Not to Vereen?" he cried. "She wasn't in the room when I woke.

Have any of you seen her? Nothing's happened to her, has it?"

"I'm afraid she's gone, Vance," Lefrew said. "I'm sorry, but that's it. And Kraur as well. Seems they did a bunko last night. Ran out."

Vance rubbed at his face bewilderedly, picturing himself as convincing in his role of the deserted and deceived husband.

"You're not serious," he said. "Vereen wouldn't do that!"

Stevens shrugged. "Vereen gone, Kraur gone, jeep gone. Seems rather conclusive, eh? Didn't she say anything, leave a note, something like that?"

"No—nothing. I can't believe it. Why? Why would they?"

"Maybe they don't like murder," Balch suggested.

Vance stared at him. "Murder?"

"Yes. Murder. Vanbraam has been murdered."

"Lord!" Vance breathed. Then, because none of them had gotten around to suggesting it, he thought that he had better—to start the logical train of thought in their minds.

"Then it must have been for the mace, don't you suppose?"

The three men did various things. Balch looked at the ground. Stevens rubbed the back of his neck; Lefrew nodded at Vance.

"Yes, it was because of the mace. The murder, I mean."

"How's that?"

"Vanbraam was murdered by someone who wanted the mace for himself."

"That's what I say," Vance said. "Kraur must—"

"Not Kraur, Vance. Nor Vereen. Only you."

"Me!"

"Come off it, Vance," Stevens said. "We know it was you. Had to be. Look at Vanbraam's body. Clothes all pulled apart, bedding torn up, whole room rifled. It could only have been done by someone who didn't know that the mace was no longer in Vanbraam's possession."

The earth slipped away from under Vance, most of it. He felt that he had suddenly been washed up on a lonely little bit of reef and left there as a hopeless castaway.

"Not in his possession?" he whispered.

"That's right," Lefrew said. "You see we took it away from him last night when we rolled him into his kip. It was to be a joke, see? He'd wake up in the morning and think he'd been robbed."

Stevens reached inside his jacket and drew out the alabaster-headed mace and showed it to Vance.

"I slept with it last night, old chap."

Vance, staring intently at the

5000-year-old Smasher of Foreheads, wet his lips.

"Uh—an Arab thief—one of the boys—" Vance started to say.

"Couldn't be," Balch said.

"Couldn't get into the compound.

Conscientious old Kraur evidently locked the gate before he and Vereen took off last night. Lefrew had to let the boys in this morning."

"Yes. Yes. All right," Vance said desperately. "But still and all, it could have been Kraur. He might not have known about the switch with the mace—"

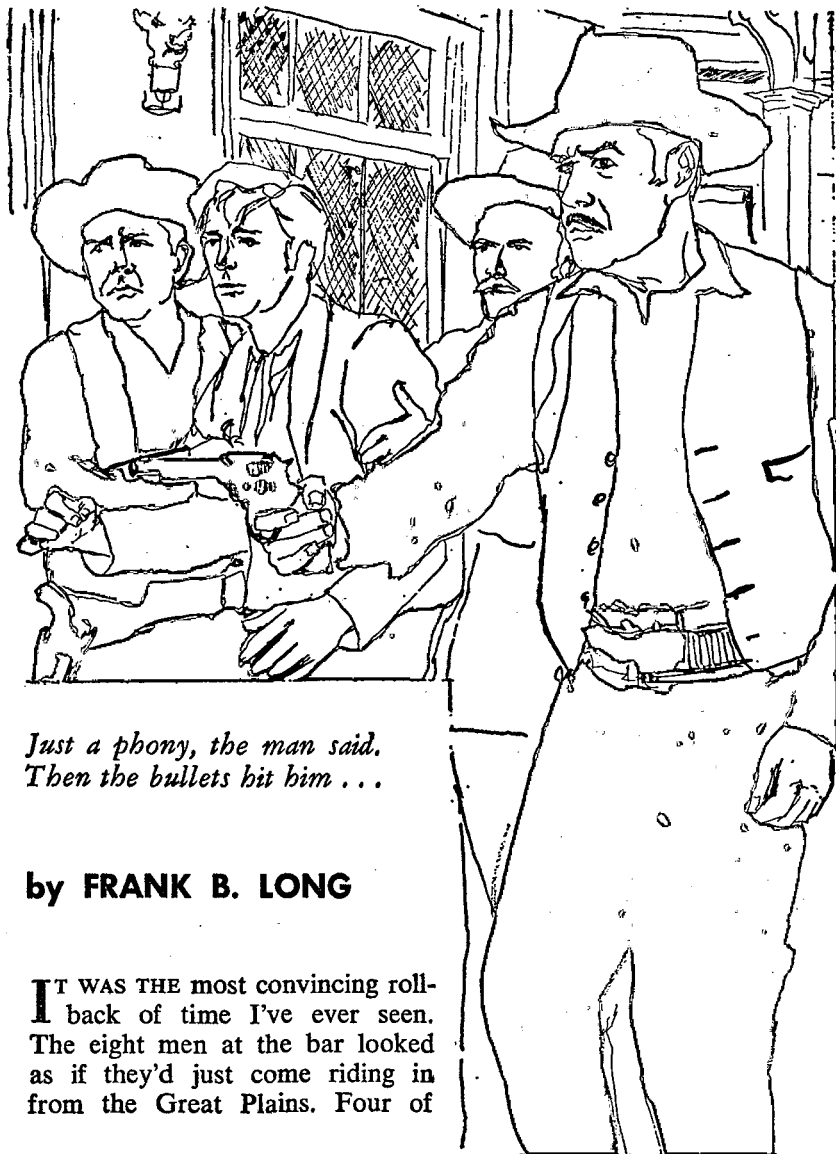
"Won't work, Vance," Lefrew said. "You see, it was Kraur's idea to pull the joke. He was there when Stevens took the mace. So why would he go back later and kill Vanbraam and rifle the room when he knew all the time that Vanbraam didn't have it? And it would be rather silly and fruitless for him to let Vereen do it, eh?"

Now even the reef was dropping from under Loren Vance. A great sea of doom was rolling in over him. He barely heard Stevens say:

"You were the only one who couldn't have known about the joke, Vance. The big mistake you made was in leaving the party before it broke up. Party poopers never prosper, don't you know?"

"MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE" ON SALE EVERYWHERE

MURDER ON LOCATION



*Just a phony, the man said.
Then the bullets hit him . . .*

by FRANK B. LONG

IT WAS THE most convincing roll-back of time I've ever seen. The eight men at the bar looked as if they'd just come riding in from the Great Plains. Four of

them had six-shooters on their hips and their boots were dust-caked, their clothes crumpled and stained.

Even their hats had a real Old Western, pre-Stetson look.

There was also a portrait in oils of Lilly Langtry on the wall behind the bar, and two walrus-mustached gamblers in Eastern clothes dating back to about 1880 were staring at it with admiring eyes as they cut cards at one of the tables.

They hadn't overlooked a fly-speck detail in doing the ghost town bit up brown—except that it was now a ghost town that had come to life again. And that's what made the whole reconstruction seem too real. Behind the two hundred grand motion picture set was an aura it would have been hard to duplicate anywhere else west of the Rockies. There's no substitute for the real thing, and they'd built the set around what was probably the best-preserved surviving ghost town in the United States.

They hadn't added too much, just a few props to replace the parts of the town that had decayed and collapsed across the years. But they were expensive props and included a completely rebuilt general store and the saloon into which I'd just walked. If I hadn't arrived in a red Jaguar, lifted Barbara Farnsworth a foot from the ground, whirled her

around and implanted a kiss on her million-dollar brow my presence on the set might have been challenged by the director or a passing cameraman.

But Barbara wouldn't have liked that and I happened to be her favorite brother-in-law.

"Well, Chuck, what do you think of it?" she asked, when I'd set her own.

"It's almost as beautiful as you are," I said. "Straight out of the West-When-Young. But right at the moment I feel as if I'd just dragged myself across five miles of alkali flats. Where can I get a double Bourbon-on-the-rocks—fast?"

"Right across the street," she said. "The bar is beautiful too. You'll be surprised."

"I'm sure I will be, if I bust in there when they're getting ready to shoot," I said. "You mean they actually serve drinks on location to the tourist trade?"

"Not exactly," she said, smiling. "But the bar is well supplied, and actors appreciate a convenience like that. We're through for the day, so you can relax with them. But don't sit at a table if you have an ace up your sleeve. There were some gamblers with checkered vests on the last coach who looked real mean."

"Sioux on the warpath worry me more," I said. "But I'll watch it. We'll have a lot to talk about, but I need a bracer first. It gives

the whole landscape more of a glow."

"You haven't changed at all, Chuck," she said. "But be honest. You didn't stop off just to find out if the old charm still works. It does, in a way. But I happen to be in love with the oldest Raines brother. That's why I married him, and if you couldn't read that between the lines of my letter—"

"I got the message," I said. "But I can't resist Westerns, even on TV, and you don't get a first-hand look at a town like this every day in the week. What's a sixty mile detour on a coast-to-coast trip?"

"I'm glad you're here, Chuck," she said. "Incidentally, the drinks are on the house. The producer's nephew arranged to have them listed as a production cost."

"He sounds like a real nice guy," I said. "Do I tip the bartender?"

"You'd better not. He's a big wheel in the cutting room."

"Well—"

"Have fun, Chuck. And don't drink too much."

"I won't," I promised.

What amazed me was that no one at the bar gave me a second glance, even though I wasn't in prairie costume or wearing a turtle-neck, shooting crew getup. But it didn't seem so strange when I thought about it. Quite a few tourists must have decided to ignore the *no-trespassing* signs since the start of the film-making, since

the town was less than four miles from Route 7, and film people are less allergic to intruders than Western game wardens.

There was a time, long, long ago, when you could crash a Hollywood set and talk to the Great Garbo, if you had nerve enough. Getting past the guards at the gate was more difficult but you just had to be a glib talker.

I'd had that kind of nerve as a kid and had never quite outgrown it. But, as I've said, the red Jaguar, and the way I'd greeted Barbara had caused everyone in the street to accept me. It was just at the bar that I was running the risk of getting cold stares from the Indian scouts and cattle rustlers. But so far it hadn't happened.

The double Bourbon-on-the-rocks that had been pushed across the bar toward me I'd put away fast and I was working on another one, giving it my undivided attention.

If I'd continued to look to right and left I might have seen the start of the regrouping that was taking place at the bar. But all I heard was a swift scraping of feet—until my elbow was jogged slightly by the man standing next to me and I turned to stare at him in resentment.

The tall rancher type who had been crowding me in the same way a moment before had changed places with a short, stocky man in buffalo skins who

was facing in the opposite direction. I could see at a glance that other changes had taken place.

The eight men at the bar were now in two separate groups and the four nearest to me had guns in their hands and handkerchiefs with cut-out eyeholes wrapped around their heads, completely concealing their features. The unholstered guns weren't six-shooters. But they were big enough, and looked like Lugars. But then I'm not much of an authority on guns.

I probably went a little pale. I only know for sure that I stood very still, with the drink I'd been working on jiggling as I set it down. The clinking of the ice cubes made the stocky Indian scout whisper a warning close to my ear.

"Stand away from me, mister. I've got an announcement to make."

I stood away from him. His voice had a Windy City accent that didn't go with the tassels on his sleeve.

"Everybody—stay where you are!" he called out. "This isn't a stickup. But it's along that line."

Almost everyone in the place froze. There were a few slight movements here and there. But they weren't hand-to-hip movements and I was pretty sure I knew why. With a six-gun loaded with blanks a gunslinger would

have had to have more than a Hollywood background to put up any kind of a bluff.

But I became less sure when a Tombstone sheriff type with a bullet-dented badge on his chest started backing into shadows a few feet from the saloon's swinging doors.

The way it looked, he drew a fraction of a second before the Indian scout at my side fired twice, the edge of his hand on the buckling, long-barreled gun as it flamed.

There were three deafening blasts and a splintering of glass at the back of the bar where Lilly Langtry was hanging. She shuddered inside the big, gilded frame and if I'd believed in ghosts I'd have been ready to swear that the look in her eyes was one of pain.

The Tombstone sheriff had clearly gotten in a mirror-smashing shot with live ammunition. But the fast draw did him no good. The six-gun fell from his hand and he clawed at his chest and went staggering backwards.

An instant before he crashed to the floor in a headlong sprawl he collided with a chair and sent it spinning all the way to the bar. A little spiral of smoke arose from the gun as he shuddered convulsively, rolled over on his face, and lay still.

There were no more movements after that, just the acrid smell of gunsmoke and the continuous

dripping of spilled liquor from the bar to the floor.

Everyone in the place had clearly forgotten how to act. The eighteen or twenty-white faces opposite the leveled guns seemed strangely alike, as if fear had drained them of all individuality.

Not a stickup, but along that line! An announcement that leaves so much unexplained can make your blood run cold, if you're standing right next to a man who has no scruples about cold-blooded murder. The stocky Indian scout didn't look drunk or hopped up. Neither did his three companions.

But the crumpled figure by the door with a dark stain widening around him was a grim reminder of how suicidal it can be to ignore an order to stand still if you don't know what the score is.

I'd moved out from the bar just far enough to be the first in the line of fire, if I'd made the mistake of thinking I wasn't included in a warning it would have been insane to disregard.

The four lean rancher types on my left with six-guns on their hips seemed to feel the same way, for they were standing motionless by the bar with their hands well in sight. The bartender had used the shattered mirror as an excuse to join them and was standing just as motionless.

The Indian scout looked at them abruptly, tightened his lips



and gestured them forward a few paces.

"Just stay where you are and no one else will get hurt," he said.

He patted the gun and moved it slowly from right to left, as if he wanted everyone to know they were well within the danger zone. The warning was strengthened by the fact that his three friends were keeping their guns leveled and stationary.

We weren't kept long in suspense. He stopped brandishing the pistol as a grim reminder that if he had to use it a second time his restraint might vanish completely, moved his stocky frame more firmly back against the bar and ordered harshly, "Come over here and stand by me, Farnsworth. Make it slow and easy."

A slender, boyish figure arose from one of the tables and started walking toward the bar, the spurs

on his dust-caked boots jangling a little.

I wouldn't have recognized him if I hadn't seen him just once on TV, playing in a band somewhere. That broadcast had stuck in my mind because I'd been naturally curious to see how Barbara Farnsworth's son was making out on his own at the age of eighteen.

She'd written to me about him. But the last time I'd seen him in the flesh he had just passed his twelfth birthday, and the last photograph she'd sent me dated back three or four years.

It hadn't been a good likeness. The Kid had taken Barbara's name for career purposes, but he was still a Raines in private life and my only teenage nephew.

Richard Farnsworth resembled his mother only slightly, had dark hair instead of blonde and took more after my brother. The son of a big star is supposed to have a lot going for him. But right at the moment that didn't seem to be doing my long-time-no-see nephew much good.

He reached the bar and stood at the Indian Scout's side, looking scared right down to his Buffalo Bill soles. There was just a faint glimmer of what could have been hope mingling with the fright in his eyes, and I thought I knew why. He was probably telling himself that it was all just an act staged for his benefit, and that in another minute the gunned-down

Tombstone sheriff by the door would get up and brush the prairie dust from his clothes, and the Indian scout burst out laughing.

The glimmer went out when the Indian scout said: "All right. Now turn around, and walk ahead of me, straight out into the street. Starting right now you're worth exactly five hundred grand to us. We don't want to take any chances with an investment like that."

He spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper. But I was standing near enough to catch what he said. I doubt if the others did. His voice was a little louder when he nudged young Farnsworth with the barrel of the big pistol and added: "If we have to shoot you we'll have no chips to cash in. But you won't either. Start walking—and keep remembering that."

He turned then and started moving toward the door, with my nephew walking on ahead of him. His armed chums moved out from the bar and fell in behind him, but they didn't turn. They backed toward the door about three feet apart, moving more slowly and making motions with their gun hands it would have been madness to ignore.

They went out through the double door fast, but one more warning came from the Indian scout before it swung shut behind him.

"If you want to stay alive don't come rushing out after us. The

place is covered from both sides of the street."

Usually, when a stickup takes place in a crowded bar, there will be two or three people who will ignore a warning like that. But this wasn't a stickup exactly, as he'd said, and it wasn't just money they'd made off with. When the stolen property is alive and redeemable at a cool half million what is said about safeguards is unlikely to be a bluff.

Everyone started shouting and milling about the instant the door swung shut. But no one made a dash for the street. Maybe he'd lied and there were no snipers posted outside. But that kind of gamble is easier to lose than to win, and who wants to end up dead?

I heard someone yell: "I'll phone the police," and saw two Eastern gamblers with the same idea in mind heading for the booth at the rear of the saloon.

For a full minute no sounds at all came from the street. Then there was a shot, and someone started screaming. Right after that there were two more gun blasts and I heard the sound of a car starting up, not more than three or four seconds after the last blast stopped echoing.

It flashed across my mind that there could be more than one car, with snipers still piling into the second one, and I let a few more seconds go by before I headed for

the door on the run. You can be of no help to anyone if you walk into a barrage and get yourself riddled with bullets.

Just one man reached the street ahead of me, and he blocked my view for an instant. Then he moved to one side and I had a clear view up and down the street. I'd been right about the two cars. The first one was almost at the end of the street and the second was just gathering speed less than eighty feet from where I was standing. They were both heading in the direction of the side road that branched off toward the main highway about a mile further on.

A lean actor in a United States cavalryman's uniform with a wind-blown handkerchief knotted loosely at his throat was holding on to a limply dangling arm with one hand, and trying to pick up a rifle that couldn't have had just blanks in it or he wouldn't have looked the way he did. There was blood on his shirt and on his hand, and I could see it trickling between his fingers as he stooped.

At his side was a dark-haired girl in an ankle-length buckskin skirt and tightly-laced bodice who could have been an extra or a featured player. She was wringing her hands and doing nothing at all to help him. I thought for an instant it had to be she who had screamed, for there didn't seem to be any other woman in sight and she was clearly hysterical.

Then I saw Barbara. She was holding on to the hitching post on a level with where I was standing, but about forty feet to the left of me.

She was swaying a little, her face chalk-white and a tight look in her eyes, as if she were fighting with all her strength to avoid succumbing to panic, as the dark-haired girl had done.

The moment our eyes met she straightened, released her grip on the hitching post and came hurrying toward me. The tight, tormented look did not vanish. But I could see before she reached my side that she was winning the struggle. She moved with surprising steadiness, and the hand that fastened on my arm was not that of an hysterical woman.

"Richard's been kidnaped," she said, with no more than a slight quaver in her voice. "You know, of course. You must have seen them grab hold of him. Has anyone phoned the police?"

"That's taken care of," I said. "But they'll never get here in time. What makes it bad is the head start they'll have in another two or three minutes. I can go after them in the Jaguar, but—"

Her hand bit into my arm before I could finish. "There's no faster car than a Jaguar," she said. "If you shot at their tires—"

She seemed to have forgotten that I had no gun to shoot with.

"Tell me something," I said. "It

will have to be quick. One of the actors tried to shoot it out with them a moment ago and was gunned down. He was using live ammunition. Was that unusual? Are most of the guns loaded with blanks?"

She shook her head. "Some but not all. A dozen of the actors are crack marksmen stunt players."

"That's all I needed to know," I said. "I'll get a gun and go after them."

She nodded and pointed toward the cavalry officer. "You could use his rifle—"

"It will help," I said. "Don't worry. I'll overtake them before the police could. Just stay steady. You're doing fine so far."

"If anything happens to Richard—"

"It won't," I said, wishing I could have been more sure of that.

"Try, Chuck. Try real hard."

"I will," I promised. "A Jaguar is a very fast car."

There were three cars parked across the street almost bumper to bumper, and a dozen men—half of them had come through the swinging doors at my back almost as fast as I had—were climbing into them.

But I didn't stop to point out to them that they would have no chance at all of catching up with the kidnapers in any car less fast than a Jaguar.

I headed straight for the blue-uniformed cavalry officer who had

just succeeded in picking up the rifle.

He surrendered it without protest the instant I explained that I could put it to good use, and that, for him, it had become an encumbrance.

"Better get that wound dressed pronto," I said. "This gun's good for a round or two more, isn't it?"

He nodded, his eyes darting to the Jaguar, which I'd mentioned also.

"They've got Barbara Farnsworth's son," he said. "The minute I saw—"

"Don't try to talk," I said. "Just get that arm attended to. I've a feeling there's a surprise in store for them."

I continued on across the street with the rifle under my arm and just as I reached the Jaguar I saw him.

He was getting into one of the cars, a giant of a man with the widest-brimmed hat I'd ever seen and a cartridge belt dangling from his waist.

He was dusty-looking from his boots to his tousled hair, which stuck out on both sides of the hat and his big-featured face had a granite-firm look that I liked straight off.

But what I liked most about him, right at that moment, was the two holstered six guns on both sides of his hip.

I walked right up to him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Is

there live ammunition in those pistols?" I asked.

He looked startled for an instant, as if he'd seen me standing at the bar unarmed, and couldn't quite reconcile the impression of harmlessness I'd made on him with the rifle under my arm, not to mention the interest I was displaying in firearms of a different type.

"Sure, both pistols have real bullets in them," he said. "And I'll tell you something. There's no better gun ever been made than a Colt six-shooter."

I could have reminded him that a few minor improvements have been made in firearms over the past eighty-five years. But it was the wrong time to start an argument.

"Just how good a marksman are you?" I asked. "I'd hardly expect an actor—"

"I don't like to boast," he said.

"I've got a *very* fast car," I said. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"It might," he said. "What kind of car?"

"A Jaguar. And it's right over there," I said, pointing.

"You want me to ride with you instead of in this car?" he asked.

"Well, I can't say it doesn't make sense. They've got a pretty big head start."

"We'll not only have to catch up with them," I said. "We'll have to slow them down by puncturing

their tires until the police get here. And with just this rifle I didn't think I'd have much of a chance. How about it?"

"Yeah, sure," he said. "It makes plenty of sense. We'd better get started."

BARBARA WAS always writing me about the weirdos that kept turning up on location when you hired a lot of extras on the Coast, and didn't go into their back-grounds to find out what their behavior might be like when the cameras stopped grinding.

I wasn't sure I might not be doing the big, silent man at my side an injustice by thinking of him as a weirdo. But as the Jaguar started eating up the miles it was impossible for me to avoid feeling that there was something very strange about him.

He seemed so laconically confident, so incredibly sure of himself.

Even when we came in sight of the two speeding cars we'd been gaining on for close to half an hour he didn't display the slightest trace of excitement or uneasiness.

"I wish I knew how many men there are in the second car," I said. "It's hard to tell from here. If they were posted outside they must be crack marksman. You don't plan a kidnaping as charged with risks as this one is and depend on target-range misfits to keep you covered."

"Don't let it worry you," he said. "We'll be more than a match for them."

"You're taking a lot for granted," I told him.

"I don't like to boast," he said. "I used to, at times. But it can bring you bad luck."

"It seems to me you're boasting right now," I said. "Why shouldn't I be worried? Two men against eight or ten, even if we're just going to puncture a few tires without risking a gun-duel. The head man didn't fire as fast as that sharp-shooter with a badge he gunned down. But he made up for that with his accuracy of aim."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "You've got to be both accurate and fast. I hate to say this, but I figure it will have to be a gun duel. That's why I came along."

He fell silent for a moment and I managed to squeeze just a little more speed out of the car. I don't know how I managed it exactly, because the speedometer was just about as high as it could go. But I had the feeling we were traveling just a little faster and the way the distance that separated us from the cars ahead kept lessening, minute by minute, seemed to confirm it.

I wasn't sure I liked what he'd just said. He sure was taking a lot for granted. Why would it have to be a gun duel if we slowed them down and the police arrived right after that?

It was his idea, not mine, and

just thinking about it gave me a bad moment.

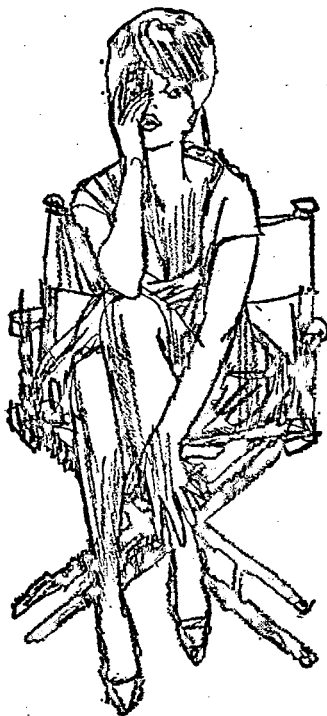
The distance had dwindled to less than three hundred feet when we saw the plane. It came circling down over the treetops close to where the highway curved around flat expanse of open desert that was about the best natural landing strip I'd ever seen. It was a gaudily painted plane, and must have been all of thirty years old.

It took me right back to my boyhood when small, red, green and yellow stunt flying planes and planes for hire were scattered all across the American landscape from coast to coast, on more farmlands and back country runways than you could count from a speeding car.

We watched it land, sweeping across the stretch of open desert in a swirl of dust and coming to a halt right where the curve of the highway brought the road so close that a quick dash to it would be no problem at all for the armed men in the cars ahead.

The two cars ahead drew in to the side of the road and came to a halt with a grinding of brakes. And then they started piling out. I caught a glimpse of my nephew looking even more scared than he had been forty-five minutes earlier, and then he was hidden from view by armed men from both cars moving swiftly about.

My big laconic friend was the first to realize just what they had



in mind. They weren't going to make a dash for the plane and turn about at ten second intervals to fire back at us. I'd guessed right about that. They were going to open fire on us right on the road and get it over with before they made the dash.

My big laconic friend had gripped my arm and whispered a warning that made me get out of the Jaguar before he himself could descend to the road.

We were both on the road, crouching down behind the Jag-

uar, when it began. There was a volley of shots from where the two cars had ground to a halt.

"Hold your fire," the giant at my side whispered close to my ear. "Wait for them to get impatient and start moving around more."

He paused an instant, then added: "It might be a good idea to let them think they've got both of us. We'll see."

The silence where we were crouching had seemingly communicated itself to them in no uncertain terms, and they placed a totally false interpretation on it. They came cautiously into view, just their heads and shoulders for a moment and then—

Another crazy preview had unrolled in my mind, a picture of them all coming out from behind the cars and advancing toward the Jaguar with their guns triggered and leveled, just in case they'd guessed wrong.

But of course it didn't happen that way; and the giant at my side must have known it would have been too much to expect. But most of them did come into view for an instant, moving about just enough to give us targets to aim at that hadn't been visible at all a moment before.

"Start firing!" he whispered. "It's now or never. We won't get another chance."

Before I could steady my rifle and draw a bead on one of the

moving heads both of his six-guns roared.

It all happened so fast I'd sent two bullets speeding toward the cars before I realized that he'd scored with both guns—not once, but three times.

I saw four men drop and another go spinning backwards with his chest half shot away. I'd scored too, apparently. But I didn't stop firing just because of that and neither did he.

It was then that my first preview came true. They were just three of them still alive and they stopped firing and made a dash for the plane.

For the first time—I don't know why—one of my laconic friend's shots went wild and they kept right on running and might have made it to the plane if he hadn't brought all three of them down before I could bring my rifle into alignment again.

A moment later we were walking along the road toward the two cars, with heated up guns in our hands, just as I'd pictured them walking if the cards had fallen in another way right after they'd opened fire.

"I don't like to brag," he'd said. Well, he certainly didn't need to. He'd have gotten my vote anyway.

Richard Farnsworth was the most frightened looking kid east or west of the Rockies. He was sitting on the sand at the edge of the road and when he saw us

enough of the fright went out of his eyes to convince me he was going to live.

And it was then that we heard the plane taking off, and the distant wail of police sirens.

It was Barbara who told me all I needed to know about my laconic, fast-shooting friend. If anyone else had undertaken to enlighten me I might not have believed it. But Barbara was simply incapable of distorting the truth.

He was a weirdo, all right. But he wasn't a Hollywood extra. In fact, he wasn't an actor at all, unless you believe, as I do, that we're all actors now and then.

"Chuck, he's actually lived in a shack in this town all his life, believe it or not. His father was a living pioneer—ninety-seven when he died. He saw Custer once, riding into the Black Hills at the head of his troops, and he handed down a legacy to his son that Bill is determined to hold on to. He's eccentric, all right. Eccentric enough to want to go on living in a ghost town despite what Holly-

wood has done to it. All right—a real character, just a little *teched*. But you'll have to admit he's quite tremendous in his way."

"He sure is," I said. "Both in girth and shooting ability. Did it ever occur to you that he might shine in a starring role? Even as a lead player."

"The producer is considering it," Barbara said. "Richard's father and I are so grateful to him now that it could very well happen. We're grateful to you, too, Chuck. I guess I don't have to tell you that. Richard isn't a hero-worshipping kid, ordinarily. But from today on—"

"The last thing I'd care to do would be to play in a Western," I told her.

"When will I be seeing you again, Chuck?"

"I'm not quite sure," I said. "But I won't be heading into the Black Hills with a six-gun on my hip. You can be certain I'll be working out real estate deals in Los Angeles, where it's peaceful, at least some of the time."

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THE LAST LAUGH

*When you're wed to Murder's
Mistress, beware! Sudden
death sometimes returns . . .*

by LEO R. ELLIS

MY SUDDEN decision to stop came with the realization I had forgotten to fill the canteen. I slowed down, and then pulled to a stop before an opening in the brush. A path here made me believe there must be some form of habitation beyond.

As I left my car, a young man poked his head out of the bushes.

"If you're coming in here, leave yore gun in the car," he warned. "Paw don't allow no firearms on this property."

Most men would have driven on. Perhaps if I had been a more self-assertive individual, I would have done the same. But since I had committed myself, and to avoid a scene, I meekly followed the boy down the path.

We entered a clearing before a shanty.

"Paw," my guide said, "I brung a stranger. I reckon he wants to buy water."

Paw lolled in a decrepit easy chair on a sagging stoop. The man was more than obese; the flesh appeared to burst from his clothing in a flood of half congealed lard. He sprawled with his bare feet spread wide, and the open V in the top of his trousers made a vulgar display of white skin.

The man lifted a bottle, drank and wiped his lips. "You got a gun, mister?"

"I left my shotgun in the car," I said hastily. "Your son told me—"

"You a government man?"

"No sir, I am a lawyer. I'm on a hunting trip." I held up the empty canteen. "Somehow, I forgot to—"

"Take that thing to maw, son. Tell her to fill it, once she's done with the wash." The eyes in the fat face shifted back to me. "So you're a lawyer, eh? I've been waiting to talk to a lawyer."

"I'm afraid I'm rather pressed for time," I said. "My companions are to meet me and—"

"They'll wait 'till you hear me out."

"But I don't think I could be of any help. You see my practice is limited to corporate law."

"Law is law," the fat man growled. He tilted the jug again and shifted his weight so it oozed deeper into the chair.

"Twenty years ago I got myself stuck on Ellen Jo," he began. "She was the purtiest gal in the county—yellow hair and cornflower blue eyes. But Ellen Jo liked Vetch Biglow. Vetch was a lowdown character, meaner'n sin."

"I'm sure all this is most interesting," I said. "But I do have an appointment, and—"

"It was tough for me to make headway, mister. Vetch had an automobile and money to spend on Ellen Jo."

I decided to abandon my caution. I had to escape, but before I could move, the young man appeared again. He seated himself on a stump, between me and the path, and jabbed a hunting knife into the wood beside him.

My palms felt clammy as I turned back to listen.

The fat man ignored the boy. "Like I said, Vetch was mean. He beat me up once, and threatened to kill me if he caught me around Ellen Jo again. Then one day in the woods, I came across Vetch's car beside an empty cabin. I snuck up and peeked in a window. I saw Ellen Jo inside."

In spite of my apprehension, I became somewhat involved in the man's story. I could envision the scene, with the young hillbilly at the window. I imagined the half drunk Vetch creeping around the cabin. I winced when the fat man described how Vetch had struck him down with a rifle butt.

"Ellen Jo's eyes got big when Vetch marched me inside," the man continued. "Vetch took a bottle of whiskey out, and handed Ellen Jo the rifle whilst he fumbled with the cork. 'Shoot him down if he moves,' Vetch told her. 'That's what I aim to do before we're through.'"

I felt torn between the desire to escape, and the urge to learn the outcome of the story. I wet my lips, but said nothing.

The fat man scratched the stubble on his chin. "Well, I looked into those soft, blue eyes and decided Ellen Jo wouldn't pull no trigger on me. I figured I had to jump Vetch whilst he was busy with that whiskey bottle. I made my move, but that blow must have weakened me.

"I stumbled and fell flat. Vetch

leaped at me just as Ellen Jo fired, and she got him through the head like a partridge on the wing."

I let out my breath. It seemed obvious that because of the stumble, the girl had killed the wrong man. I did not mention this fact.

"Whilst Ellen Jo was shook up over killing Vetch, I made a deal," the man went on. "I told her I'd claim Vetch had found me alone in the cabin, and I'd shot him in self defense. I figured the law wouldn't touch me, being everybody knew Vetch had threatened to kill me before."

I shifted my feet and waited. I wondered if he expected me to voice an opinion.

The man hadn't finished. Suddenly he heaved his bulk forward in the chair. "Now, mister lawyer, if I was to tell the sheriff that Ellen Jo shot Vetch Biglow, would they put her away for me?"

I felt shocked, nauseated at the perfidy of his suggestion. I drew myself up. "Since you have seen fit to remain silent for twenty years, I seriously doubt that the law would take any action now."

The man slumped back in the chair.

"I was afeered of that," he said and closed his eyes.

A moment later a bony, bare-foot woman shuffled around the cabin with my canteen. As she accepted the dollar bill, I saw her eyes. They were large eyes, set deep in a worn face, and the color could have been a faded, cornflower blue.

The eyes haunted me; they were the only part of the woman that seemed alive.

I snatched my canteen and hurried to the path. I burst out on the road and had reached my car, when I heard a shotgun blast back at the shanty.

I yanked the car door open and looked inside. My gun was gone. The young man, I thought bitterly. The boy had told me to leave the gun here, so he could return and steal it later.

I hesitated, undecided on what action I should take. I froze when a second sound drifted down from the shanty—this time I heard the high pitched cackle of a woman's triumphant laugh.

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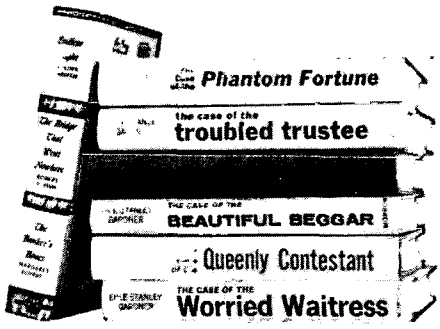
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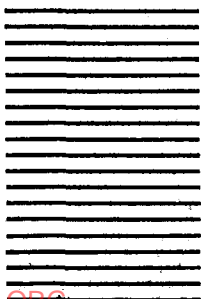
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